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ISAAC ASIMOV
By the Numbers

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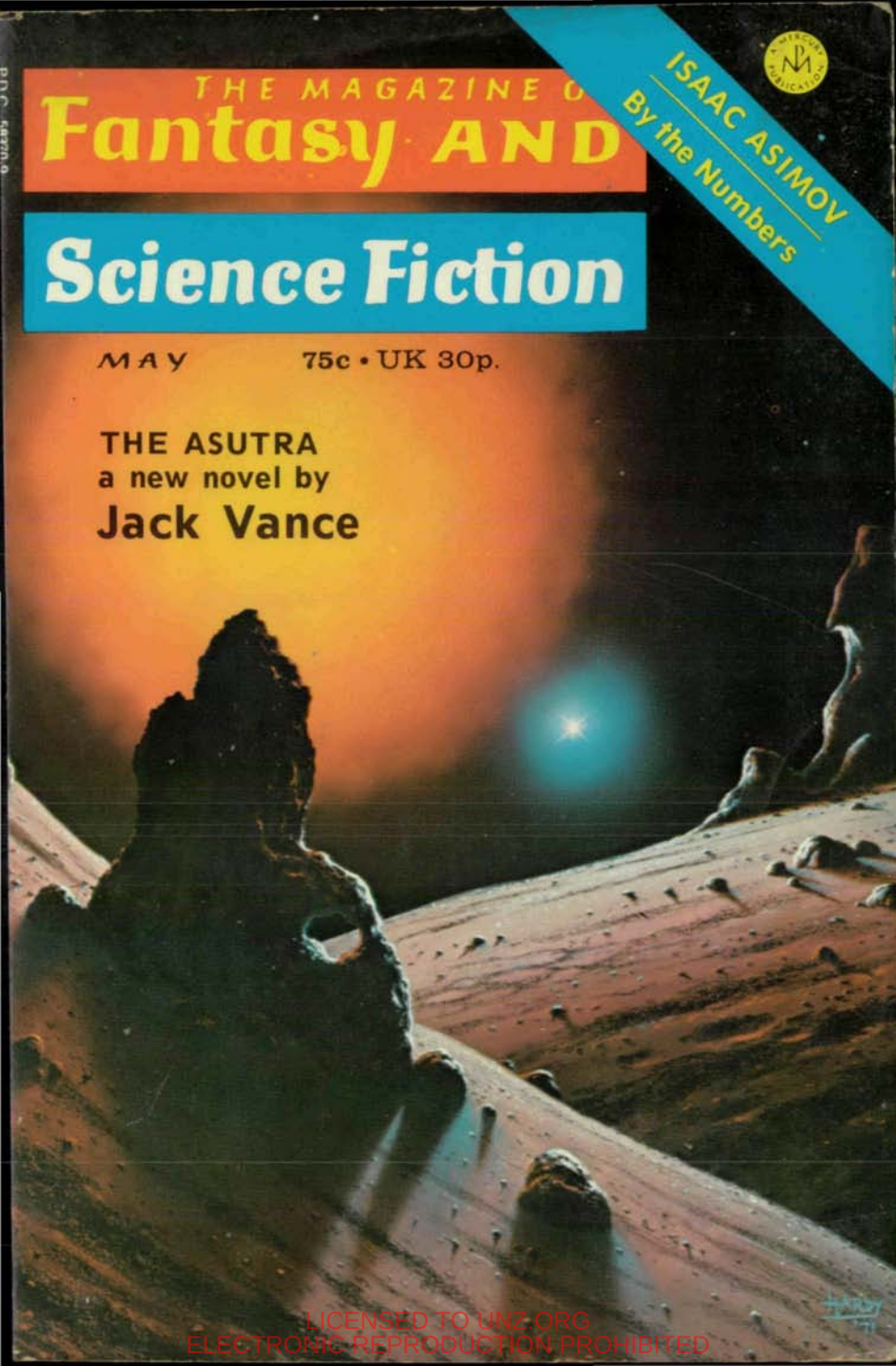
THE ASUTRA
a new novel by
Jack Vance



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# Fantasy and Science Fiction

*Including Venture Science Fiction*

**MAY • 24th YEAR OF PUBLICATION**



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In this, the final novel of Jack Vance's Durdane trilogy, the remaining mysteries surrounding the planet Durdane and the parasitic creatures known as the asutra are solved. If you've read the first two books (*The Faceless Man,* Feb.-March 1971; *The Brave Free Men,* July-Aug. 1972), you need no further introduction to the magic of Jack Vance's storytelling. For those of you who are new to this series, we emphasize that it is not necessary to have read the earlier books to enjoy and understand this one; *The Asutra* is a complete novel on its own.

# The Asutra

## by JACK VANCE

*Synopsis of Books I and II:* The world Durdane lies beyond that shimmering wall of stars known as the Schiafarilla Cluster. The inhabitants of Durdane have long lost contact with the Earth worlds and are only dimly aware that other human places exist.

Durdane is a large planet. The great world-mass Caraz is populated only by a few barbarians. To the east of Caraz is a second smaller continent, with Shant to the north, Palasedra to the south and the Great Salt Bog between.

Shant, the most civilized region of Durdane, is a confederacy of 62 cantons governed by a single man, the Anome ( or the Faceless Man), whose identity is known only to himself. Every citizen of Shant wears a torc containing a strand of dexax, which the Anome, should he so choose, can explode by means of a coded radio pulse. This capability, together with his anonymity, provides the Anome his unquestioned authority.

At the center of Shant are the Hwan Mountains, the lair of a mysterious half-human race known as Roguskhoi. Periodically they drive forth to ravage, to kill and to capture. Their lust is insatiable: they impregnate women of every age with infinitesimal homunculi, who quickly grow into Roguskhoi imps, a dozen or more, which are given birth to augment the Roguskhoi horde.

The Roguskhoi are a source of both terror and agonized perplexity. Where is their origin? Who introduced them into Shant and for what purpose? A large number of folk suspect Palasedra, but no significant evidence supports this view. Other questions, as mysterious as the rest: why does the Anome ignore the horrid creatures? Why does he temporize? Why has he failed to take decisive action against the Roguskhoi?

Gastel Etzwane, a musician, and Ifness, a Fellow of the Historical Institute of Earth, attempt to answer these questions. Through a series of fateful events Etzwane becomes, in



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effect, Anome, and imprisons his predecessor, Sajarano of Sershan. Ifness, however, has disregarded the first law of the Institute: a Fellow may not interfere in the affairs of the world he studies. Ifness is required to leave Durdane, and Etzwane is left to cope with a staggering load of responsibilities.

Etzwane questions Sajarano at length; Sajarano refuses to justify his peculiar apathy, except to urge that the Roguskhoi are in actuality no great threat, that the exertion required to defeat them is incommensurate with the benefits to be derived from the abatement of their raids.

Etzwane rejects such arguments as unreal, and issues a war-call, mobilizing the cantons of Shant. But, as Sajarano prophesied, the folk of Shant respond only sluggishly; too long they have relied upon the omnipotence of the Anome.

The Chief Discriminator (i.e., the director of the secret police; is Aun Sharah, an urbane and clever man whome Etzwane distrusts. Etzwane removes Aun Sharah from his sensitive post, and makes him Director of Materials Procurement much to Aun Sharah's distaste.

Shant is deficient in metal. The technists can fabricate neither energy-weapons nor propulsion machinery. Travel is accomplished afoot, by pacer-drawn carriage, or by means of the balloons which sail the length and breadth of Shant, linked to dollies running in slots. At one time Etzwane served as indentured worker for the balloonway, but escaped Angwin Junction with the unwitting assistance of a certain Jerd Finnerack. Etzwane remembers Finnerack as a person staunch and dependable, and learns to his dismay that Finnerack has been sent to the dreaded Camp Three for recalcitrants, in Canton Glaiy.

Back issues with the second novel of Jack Vance's Durdane trilogy are available. "The Brave Free Men": July-Aug. 1972. Send $1.00 for each *issue*. Magazines will be mailed the same day order is received.
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Etzwane rescues Jerd Finnerack only to find that the good-natured lad of Angwin Junction has become a gaunt embittered man, nursing a consuming rancor against the system which brought him so much suffering. Finnerack grudgingly agrees to act as Etzwane's lieutenant. Etzwane also recruits into his service Dystar, a distinguished musician and Mialambre: Octagon, a rather pedantic jurist. Dystar is Etzwane's father, though Dystar knows nothing of the relationship.

Inexplicable circumstances occur. Sajarano of Sershan disappears from his palace; his corpse is discovered in a nearby forest. Etzwane is bewildered and oppressed by the fact of Sajarano's death. Meanwhile the Roguskhoi depredations are ever more destructive. The new militia engages them in battle but lacking adequate weapons suffers a series of demoralizing defeats.

At Garwiy however the technists have contrived a novel energy-gun, which hopefully will turn the tide of battle against the Roguskhoi. Etzwane makes a difficult but necessary decision: production of torcs must be

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interrupted in order to expedite the construction of the new weapons, a decision of far-reaching scope which disturbs the more conservative members of his staff. But before the weapons can be supplied in adequate quantities, the Roguskhoi launch massive attacks upon the cantons of the north coast.

The Roguskhoi suffer their first defeat. Etzwane's gratification is marred by the near-certainty that one among his intimates is a traitor, who for reasons beyond conjecture connives at the defeat of Shant. Dystar? Finnerack? Aun Sharah? Mialambre? Only Aun Sharah has given Etzwane reason for suspicion, and much of this is simply the effect of Aun Sharah's urbane personality. Hard evidence is non-existent. Etzwane is reminded of Sajarano and his incomprehensible conduct.

A corps of elite warriors is created: men who no longer wear torcs. These are the Brave Free Men of Shant. Etzwane also removes the torcs from the necks of his immediate entourage: an era has clearly come to an end.

Finnerack takes command of the Brave Free Men and also the Flyers who harass the Roguskhoi from armed sailplanes. The Roguskhoi are now in retreat; the great danger to Shant is past.

Etzwane sets a trap for the traitor: Aun Sharah would seem to be guilty. He vigorously denies the accusation and indeed demonstrates his innocence. Who then?

The Roguskhoi retreat south, through the Great Salt Bog and into Palasedra. Finnerack, intoxicated by the efficacy of his warriors, insists on punitive raids against the Palasedrans, who would now seem to be the instigators of the Roguskhoi invasion.

Etzwane, chastened by his incorrect accusation of Aun Sharah, absolutely forbids such forays. Nonetheless they occur; the Eagle-Dukes of Palasedra threaten war upon Shant. They deny all responsibility for the Roguskhoi, and demand that envoys be sent to Palasedra, where they will supply proof of their assertion.

Etzwane, Finnerack, and Mialambre fly to Palasedra, where to Etzwane's astonishment he finds the Earthman Ifness, as austere and self-contained as ever.

The Palasedran Chancellor not only denies all responsibility for the Roguskhoi, he asserts that they were brought to Durdane in a space-ship and discharged into a Palasedran valley known as the Engh; toward the Engh the Roguskhoi are now retreating.

Etzwane, Ifness, Finnerack and Mialambre are flown by glider to the Engh where they witness a cataclysmic battle between the Palasedrans and the Roguskhoi. Palasedra's innocence is demonstrated; the war which Finnerack's recklessness almost provoked has been averted.

A few Roguskhoi chieftains win free and flee to the upper Engh where a space-ship awaits them. To the astonishment of all, Finnerack breaks away from the group and tries to board the space-ship. Mialambre thwarts his insane endeavor; Finnerack refuses to explain his action; he becomes taciturn and will not speak at all.

Back in the Palasedran town Chemaoue many mysteries are resolved. Autopsies performed on the corpses of Roguskhoi reveal that each carried within himself an asutra: a small parasitical creature which acts as mentor for its host. The Palasedrans have removed such a creature from Finnerack; by such means he had been

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impelled to acts of treachery and provocation. Etzwane recalls Sajarano and his strange conduct; he also must have been infected.

The invasion of Shant, if such it were, has been repelled. But mysteries persist. A civilization competent to construct and fly space-ships must certainly be able to defeat the meager armies of Shant: why, then, the Roguskhoi and their primitive weapons?

Ifness tends to regard the Roguskhoi as an experiment in biological warfare, weapons which reproduce themselves upon the bodies of the enemy. If he is correct the invasion of Shant has been a casual experiment, the preliminary phase of a larger campaign, against a larger adversary. Who? The whole configuration of Earth-worlds? The universe of man? In the absence of significant information Ifness refuses to speculate.

---

## Chapter 1

The Roguskhoi and their dominant asutra had been expelled from Shant. Belabored on the ground by the Brave Free Men, tormented from above by the Flyers of Shant, the Roguskhoi had retreated south, across the Great Salt Bog into Palasedra. In a dismal valley the horde had been destroyed, with only a handful of chieftains escaping in a remarkable red-bronze spaceship, and so the strange invasion of Shant came to an end.

For Gastel Etzwane the victory brought only temporary joy, after which he fell into a dour and introspective mood. He became aware of a vast aversion to responsibility, to public activity in general; he marveled that he had functioned as well as long as he had. Returning to Garwiy he took himself from the Council of Purple Men with almost offensive abruptness; he became Gastel Etzwane the musician: so much, no more. At once his spirits soared; he felt free and whole. Two days the mood persisted, then waned as the question *what now?* found no natural or easy response.

On a hazy autumn morning, with the three suns lazing behind self-generated disks of milk-white, pink and blue nimbus, Etzwane walked along Galias Avenue. Tape trees trailed purple and grey ribbons about his head; beside him moved the Jardeen River on its way to the Sualle. Other folk strolled along Galias Avenue, but none took notice of the man who so recently had ruled their lives. As Anome, Etzwane of necessity had avoided notoriety; he was not a conspicuous man in any event. He moved with economy, spoke in a flat voice, used no gesticulations, all of which made for a somber force disproportionate to his years. When Etzwane looked in a mirror, he often felt a discord between his image, which was saturnine, even a trifle grim, and

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what he felt to be his true self: a being beset by doubts, shivered by passions, jerked here and there by irrational exhilarations; a person oversusceptible to charm and beauty, wistful with longing for the unattainable. So Etzwane half seriously regarded himself. Only when he played music did he feel a convergence of his incongruous parts.

What now?

He had long taken the answer for granted: he would rejoin Frolitz and the Pink-Black-Azure-Deep Greeners. Now he was not so sure, and he halted to watch broken strands from the tape trees drifting along the river. The old music sounded in his mind far away, a wind blowing out of his youth.

He turned away from the river and continued along the avenue, and presently came upon a three-storied structure of black and gray-green glass with heavy mulberry lenses bulging over the street: Fontenay's Inn, which put Etzwane in mind of Ifness, Earthman and Research Fellow of the Historical Institute. After the destruction of the Roguskhoi he and Ifness had flown by balloon across Shant to Garwiy. Ifness carried a bottle containing an asutra taken from the corpse of a Roguskhoi chieftain. The creature resembled a large insect, eight inches long and four inches in thickness: a hybrid of ant and tarantula, mingled with something unimaginable. Six arms, each terminating in three clever palps, depended from the torso. At one end ridges of purple-brown chitin protected the optical process: three oil-black balls in shallow cavities tufted with hair. Below trembled feeder mechanisms and a cluster of mandibles. During the journey Ifness occasionally tapped on the glass, to which the asutra returned only a flicker of the optical organs. Etzwane found the scrutiny unnerving; somewhere within the glossy torso subtle processes were occurring: ratiocination or an equivalent operation, hate or a sensation analogous.

Ifness refused to speculate upon the nature of the asutra. "Guesses are of no value. The facts, as we know them, are ambiguous."

"The asutra tried to destroy the folk of Shant," declared Etzwane. "Is this not significant?"

Ifness only shrugged and looked out across the purple distances of Canton Shade. They now sailed close-hauled into a north wind, bucking and sliding as the winch tender coaxed the best from the *Conseil,* a notoriously cranky balloon.

Etzwane attempted another question. "You examined the asutra you took from Sajarano: what did you learn?"

Ifness spoke in a measured

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voice. "The asutra metabolism is unusual, and beyond the scope of my analysis. They seem a congenitally parasitical form of life, to judge from the feeding apparatus. I have discovered no disposition to communicate, or perhaps the creatures use a method too subtle for my comprehension. They enjoy the use of paper and pencil and make neat geometrical patterns, sometimes of considerable complication but no obvious meaning. They show ingenuity in solving problems and appear to be both patient and methodical."

"How did you learn all this?" demanded Etzwane.

"I devised tests. It is all a matter of presenting inducements."

"Such as?"

"The possibility of freedom. The avoidance of discomfort."

Etzwane, faintly disgusted, mulled the matter over for a period. Presently he asked, "What do you intend to do now? Will you return to Earth?"

Ifness looked up into the lavender sky, as if taking note of some far destination. "I hope to continue my inquiries; I have much to gain and little to lose. With equal certainty I will encounter official discouragement. My nominal superior Dasconetta has nothing to gain and much to lose."

Curious, thought Etzwane; was this the way things went on Earth? The Historical Institute imposed a rigorous discipline upon its Fellows, enjoining absolute detachment from the affairs of the world under examination. So much he knew of Ifness, his background and his work. Little enough, everything considered.

The journey proceeded. Ifness read from *The Kingdoms of Old Caraz;* Etzwane maintained a dour silence. The *Conceil* spun up the slot; Cantons Erevan, Maiy, Conduce, Jardeen, Wild Rose passed below and disappeared into the autumn murk. The Jardeen Gap opened ahead; the Ushkadel rose to either side; the *Conseil* blew along the Vale of Silence, through the gap and so to South Station under the astounding towers of Garwiy.

The station gang hauled the *Conseil* down to the platform; Ifness alighted and with a polite nod for Etzwane set off across the plaza.

In a sardonic fury Etzwane watched the spare figure disappear into the crowd. Ifness clearly meant to avoid even the most casual of relationships. Now, two days later, looking across Galias Avenue, he was reminded of Ifness. He crossed the avenue and entered Fontenay's Inn.

The day room was quiet; a few figures sat here and there in the shadows musing over their mugs.

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Etzwane went to the counter where he was attended by Fontenay himself. "Well then, it's Etzwane the musician. If you and your khitan are seeking a place, it can't be done. Master Hesselrode and his Scarlet-Mauve-Whiters works the stand. No offense intended; you scratch with the best of them. Accept a mug of Wild Rose ale, at no charge."

Etzwane raised the mug. "My best regards." He drank. The old life had not been so bad after all. He looked around the chamber. There: the low platform where so often he had played music; the table where he had met lovely Jurjin of Xhiallinen; the nook where Ifness had waited for the Faceless Man. In every quarter hung memories which now seemed unreal; the world had become sane and ordinary... Etzwane peered across the room. In the far corner a tall white-haired man of uncertain age sat making entries into a notebook. Mulberry light from a high bull's-eye played around him; as Etzwane watched, the man raised a goblet to his lips and sipped. Etzwane turned to Fontenay. "The man in the far alcove — what of him?"

Fontenay glanced across the room. "Isn't that the gentleman Ifness? He uses my front suite. An odd type, stern and solitary, but his money is as downright as sweat. He's from Canton Cope, or so I gather."

"I believe I know the gentleman." Etzwane took his mug and walked across the chamber. Ifness noted his approach, sidewise, from the corner of his eye. Deliberately he closed his notebook and sipped from his goblet of ice water. Etzwane gave a polite salute and seated himself; had he waited for an invitation, Ifness might well have kept him standing. "On impulse I stepped in, to recall our adventures together," said Etzwane, "and I find you engaged at the same occupation."

Ifness' lips twitched. "Sentimentality has misled you. I am here because convenient lodging is available and because I can work, usually, without interruption. What of you? Have you no official duties to occupy you?"

"None whatever," said Etzwane. "I have resigned my connection with the Purple Men."

"You have earned your liberty," said Ifness in a nasal monotone. "I wish you the pleasure of it. And now —" with meaningful exactitude he arranged his notebook.

"I am not reconciled to idleness," said Etzwane. "It occurs to me that I might be able to work with you."

Ifness arched his eyebrows. "I am not sure that I understand your proposal."

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"It is simple enough," said Etzwane. "You are a Fellow of the Historical Institute; you perform research on Durdane and elsewhere; you could use my assistance. We have worked together before; why should we not continue to do so?"

Ifness spoke in a crisp voice. "The concept is impractical. My work for the most part is solitary and occasionally takes me off-planet, which of course —"

Etzwane held up his hand. "This is precisely my goal," he declared, though the idea had never formed itself in terms quite so concrete. "I know Shant well; I have traveled Palasedra; Caraz is a wilderness; I am anxious to visit other worlds."

"These are natural and normal yearnings," said Ifness. "Nevertheless, you must make other arrangements."

Etzwane pensively drank ale. Ifness watched stonily sidewise. Etzwane asked, "You still study the asutra?"

"I do."

"You feel that they have not yet done with Shant?"

"I am convinced of nothing." Ifness spoke in his didactic monotone. "The asutra tested a biological weapon against the men of Shant. The weapon — which is to say, the Roguskhoi — failed because of crudities in execution, but no doubt served its purpose; the asutra are now better informed. Their options are still numerous. They can continue their experiments, using different weapons. On the other hand, they may decide to expunge the human presence on Durdane altogether."

Etzwane had no comment to make. He drained his mug and in spite of Ifness' disapprobation signaled Fontenay for replenishment. "You are still trying to communicate with the asutra?"

"They're all dead."

"And you made no progress?"

"Essentially none."

"Do you plan to capture others?"

Ifness gave him a cool smile. "My goals are more modest than you suspect. I am concerned principally for my status in the Institute, that I may enjoy my accustomed perquisites. Your interests and mine engage at very few points."

Etzwane scowled and drummed his fingers on the table. "You prefer that the asutra do not destroy Durdane?"

"As an abstract ideal I will embrace this proposition."

"The situation itself is not abstract," Etzwane pointed out. "The Roguskhoi have killed thousands! If they won here, they might go on to attack the Earth worlds."

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"The thesis is somewhat broad," said Ifness. "I have put it forward as a possibility. My associates however incline to other views."

"How can there be doubt?" Etzwane demanded. "The Roguskhoi are aggressive weapons."

"So it would seem, but against whom? The Earth worlds? Ridiculous; how could they avail against civilized weaponry?" Ifness made an abrupt gesture. "Now please excuse me; a certain Dasconetta asserts his status at my expense, and I must consider the matter. It was pleasant to have seen you..."

Etzwane leaned forward. "Have you identified the asutra home world?"

Ifness gave his head an impatient shake. "It might be one of twenty thousand, probably off toward the center of the galaxy."

"Should we not seek out this world, to study it at close hand?"

"Yes, yes, of course." Ifness opened his journal.

Etzwane rose to his feet. "I wish you success in your struggle for status."

"Thank you."

Etzwane returned across the room. He drank another mug of ale, glowering back toward Ifness, who serenely sipped ice water and made notes in his journal.

Etzwane left Fontenay's Inn and continued north beside the Jardeen, pondering a possibility which Ifness himself might not have considered... He turned aside into the Avenue of Purple Gorgons, where he caught a diligence to the Corporation Plaza. He alighted at the Jurisdictionary and climbed to the offices of the Intelligence Agency on the second floor. The director was Aun Sharah, a handsome man, subtle and soft-spoken, with an Aesthete's penchant for casual elegance. Today he wore a suave robe of gray over a midnight-blue body suit; a star-sapphire dangled from his left ear by a silver chain. He greeted Etzwane affably but with a wary deference that reflected their previous differences. "I understand that you are once again an ordinary citizen," said Aun Sharah. "The metamorphosis was swift. Has it been complete?"

"Absolutely; I am a different person," said Etzwane. "When I think over the past year, I wonder at myself."

"You have surprised many folk," said Aun Sharah in a dry voice. "Including myself." He leaned back in his chair. "What now? Is it to be music once more?"

"Not just yet. I am unsettled and restless, and I am now interested in Caraz."

"The subject is large," said Aun Sharah in his easy half-facetious

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manner. "However, your lifetime lies before you."

"My interest is not all-embracing," said Etzwane. "I merely wonder if Roguskhoi have ever been seen in Caraz."

Aun Sharah gazed reflectively at Etzwane. "It seems your term as private citizen has quickly run its course."

Etzwane ignored the remark. "Here are my thoughts. The Roguskhoi were tested in Shant and defeated. So much we know. But what of Caraz? Perhaps they were originally deployed in Caraz; perhaps a new horde is in formation. A dozen possibilities suggest themselves, including the chance that nothing whatever has happened."

"True," said Aun Sharah. "Our intelligence is essentially local. Still, on the other hand, what can we do? We strain to encompass the work already required of us."

"In Caraz news drifts down the rivers. At the seaports, mariners learn of events occurring far inland. What if you circulated your men along the docks and through the waterfront taverns and attempt to find what might be the news from Caraz?"

"The idea has value," said Aun Sharah. "I will issue such an order. Three days should suffice, for at least a preliminary survey."

## Chapter 2

The thin dark solitary boy who had taken to himself the name Gastel Etzwane* had become a hollow-cheeked young man with an intense and luminous gaze. When Etzwane played music, the corners of his mouth rose to bring a poetic melancholy to his otherwise saturnine features; otherwise his demeanor was quiet and controlled beyond the ordinary. Etzwane had no intimates save perhaps old Frolitz the musician, who thought him mad...

On the day following his visit to the Jurisdictionary he received a message from Aun Sharah. "The investigation has yielded immediate information, in which I am sure you will be interested. Please call at your convenience."

Etzwane went at once to the Jurisdictionary.

Aun Sharah took him to a chamber high in one of the sixth-level cupolas. Four-foot thick sky-lenses of water-green glass softened the lavender sunlight and intensified the colors of the Canton

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**Among the Chilites of Temple Bashon, each Pure Boy selected for himself a name exemplifying his hopes for the future. Gastel was an heroic flyer of ancient times, Etzwane a legendary musician. The name had caused Etzwane's soul-father Osso shock and dissatisfaction.*

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Glirris rug. The room contained a single table twenty feet in diameter, supporting a massive contour map. Aproaching, Etzwane saw a surprisingly detailed representation of Caraz. Mountains were carved from pale Canton Faible amber, with inlaid quartz to indicate the presence of snow and ice. Silver threads and ribbons indicated the rivers; the plains were gray-purple slate; cloth in various textures and colors represented forests and swamps. Shant and Palasedra appeared as incidental islands off the eastern flank.

Aun Sharah walked slowly along the northern edge of the table. "Last night," he said, "a local Discriminator* brought in a seaman from the Gyrmont docks. He told a strange tale indeed, which he had heard from a bargeman at Erbol, here at the mouth of the Keba River." Aun Sharah put his finger down on the map. "The bargeman had floated a load of sulfur down from this area up here —" Aun Sharah touched a spot two thousand miles inland "— which is known as Burnoun. About here is a settlement, Shillinsk; it is not shown...At Shillinsk the bargeman spoke to nomad traders from the west, beyond these mountains, the Kuzi Kaza..."

Etzwane returned to Fontenay's Inn in a diligence, to meet Ifness on his way out the door. Ifness gave him a distant nod and would have gone his way had not Etzwane stepped in front of him. "A single moment of your time."

Ifness paused, frowning. "What do you require?"

"You mentioned a certain Dasconetta. He would be a person of authority?"

Ifness looked at Etzwane sidelong. "He occupies a responsible post, yes."

"How can I get in touch with Dasconnetta?"

Ifness reflected. "In theory, several methods exist. Practically you would be forced to work through me."

"Very well, be so good as to put me into contact with Dasconetta."

Ifness gave a wintry chuckle. "Matters are not all that simple. I suggest that you prepare a brief exposition of your business. You will submit this to me. In due course I will be in contact with Dasconetta, at which time I may be able to transmit your message, assuming, naturally, that I find it neither tendentious nor trivial."

"All very well," said Etzwane,

---

**Discriminator: In the language of Shant* avistioi: *literally, 'nice discriminator'. The* avistioi *originally were inspectors hired by the Garwiy Aesthetes, and only gradually assumed the function of the cantonal police. Etzwane and Aun Sharah had expanded their scope.*

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"but the matter is urgent. He will be sure to complain at any delay."

Ifness spoke in a measured voice. "I doubt if you are capable of predicting Dasconetta's reactions. The man makes a fad of unpredictability."

"Nevertheless, I believe that he will give serious regard to my business," said Etzwane, "especially if he is concerned for his prestige. Is there no way to communicate with him directly?"

Ifness made a gesture of weary resignation. "Well, then, briefly, what is your proposal? If the matter is important, I can at least advise you."

"I realize this," said Etzwane. "But you are preoccupied with research; you stated that you could not cooperate with me, that you lacked authority, and you implied that all must be referred to Dasconetta. Hence, the rational course is to discuss my business with Dasconetta at once."

"You have misinterpreted my remarks," said Ifness, his voice rising a trifle. "I stated that I had no place for you in my entourage, that I could not escort you on a tour of the Earth-worlds. I did not indicate that my authority was insufficient or that I deferred to Dasconetta in any respect, save that imposed by an administrative technicality. I must listen to your business, since this is my function. So then, what is the matter which has so excited you?"

Etzwane spoke tonelessly. "A report out of Caraz has come to my attention. It may be no more than a rumor, but I feel that it must be investigated. To this end I need a swift vehicle which I am sure Dasconetta can supply."

"Aha! Well, well, indeed. And what is the nature of this rumor?"

Etzwane went on in a flat voice. "Roguskhoi have appeared in Caraz: a considerable horde."

Ifness gave a curt nod. "Go on."

"The horde fought an army of men, who reputedly used energy weapons. The Roguskhoi were apparently defeated, but here the rumor is uncertain."

"What is the source of this information?"

"A mariner who heard the tale from a Caraz bargeman."

"Where did the occurrence take place?"

"Is not this irrelevant?" asked Etzwane. "I am requesting only a suitable vehicle in which to investigate the business."

Ifness spoke gently, as if to an irrational child. "The situation is more complex than you suppose. If you communicated this request to Dasconetta, or anyone else of the Coordination, they would merely refer the matter back to me, with a sharp comment as to my compe-

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tence. Further, you know the proscriptions which control Fellows of the Institute: we never interfere with the flow of local events. I have violated this precept, of course, but so far I have been able to justify my acts. If I allowed you to place this remarkable request before Dasconetta, they would think me not only irresponsible but foolish. There is no help for it. I agree that the rumor is significant, and whatever my personal inclinations, I may not ignore it. Let us return into the tavern; I now require from you all factual information."

For an hour the discussion continued, Etzwane politely persistent, Ifness formal, rational and impervious as a block of glass. Under no circumstances would he attempt to procure for Etzwane a vehicle of the type he had in mind.

"In that case," said Etzwane, "I will proceed with less efficient transportation."

The statement surprised Ifness. "You seriously intend to venture into Caraz? Such a journey might occupy two or three years — assuming day-to-day survival."

"I have taken all this into account," said Etzwane. "Naturally I will not trudge afoot through Caraz. I intend to fly."

"By balloon? By glider?" Ifness raised his eyebrows. "Across the wilds of Caraz?"

"Long ago the folk of Shant built a combination craft, the so-called 'Farway.' The fuselage and wing roots were gas inflated; the wings were long and flexible. Such a craft is heavy enough to glide, but light enough to stay aloft on a breath."

Ifness toyed with a silver trinket. "And once you touch ground?"

"I am vulnerable, but not helpless. A man, single-handed, can kite himself up in an ordinary glider; still, he must wait for wind. The 'Farway' rises against an easy breeze. The voyage will be a risk, I agree."

"A risk? Suicide."

Etzwane nodded somberly. "I would prefer the use of a power vehicle such as Dasconetta might supply."

Ifness gave the silver trinket a petulant jerk. "Return here tomorrow. I will arrange for air transportation. You will be under my orders."

For the folk of Shant the affairs of the next canton were of small concern; Caraz was as far as the Schiafarilla* and not nearly so visible. Etzwane, a musician, had

**Schiafarilla: a cluster of two thousand magnificent stars which illuminated the summer nights of Shant. The Earth-worlds lay on the far side of the Schiafarilla.*

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traveled every region of Shant and was somewhat wider in his viewpoints; nevertheless, Caraz was to him no more than a far region of windy wastes, mountains and chasms of incomprehensible scale. The rivers of Caraz straddled vast plains, brimming too wide to be seen from bank to bank. Durdane, nine thousand years before, had been settled by fugitives, recalcitrants and dissidents; the wildest and most irredeemable ones had fled to Caraz to lose themselves forever. Their descendants still roamed the solitudes.

At noon Etzwane returned to Fontenay's Inn, but found no sign of Ifness. An hour passed, and another. Etzwane went outside and paced up and down the avenue. His mood was placid, if somewhat heavy. Irritation toward Ifness, so he had concluded, was self-defeating. As well feel anger toward the three suns.

Ifness at last appeared, striding up Galias Avenue from the direction of the Sualle. His face was set in long pensive lines; for a moment it seemed as if he would walk past Etzwane without acknowledgment, but at the last moment he stopped short. "You wanted to meet Dasconetta," said Ifness. "So you shall. Wait here, I will be no more than a moment."

He stepped into the tavern. Etzwane looked up into the sky as a bank of clouds passed before the suns; gloom pervaded the city. Etzwane frowned and shivered.

Ifness returned, wearing a black cloak which flapped dramatically as he walked. "Come," said Ifness, and turned up the avenue.

Etzwane, thinking to assert his dignity, made no move to follow. "Where?"

Ifness swung about, eyes glittering. He spoke in an even voice. "In a joint enterprise each party must learn what to expect from the other. From me you may count on information adequate to the needs of the moment; I will not burden you with overelaboration. From you I will expect alertness, discretion and responsiveness. We will now proceed, to Canton Wild Rose."

Etzwane felt he had won at least a minor concession and went silently with Ifness to the balloon-way station.

The balloon *Karmoune* tugged at the guys; immediately upon Ifness and Etzwane stepping into the gondola, the gound crew loosed the judas-dolly; the balloon swung aloft. The winch tender canted to the beam wind; the *Karmoune* fled south, dolly singing in the slot.

Through Jardeen Gap they flew, with the Ushkadel bulking to either side. Etzwane glimpsed the palace of the Sershans glittering through

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the forest of similax and cypress. The pleasant vales of Canton Wild Rose spread before them, and presently they came to the town Jamilo. The *Karmoune* showed an orange semaphore; the ground crew shackled the running-dolly and walked the judas-dolly to the depot, bringing the *Karmoune* down to the landing ramp. Ifness and Etzwane alighted; Ifness signaled a diligence. He gave the driver a terse order; the two climbed aboard and the pacer* sprang off down the road.

For half an hour they drove up the Jardeen Valley, past the country places of the Garwiy Aesthetes†, then through an orchard of strawberry trees to an ancient manor house. Ifness spoke to Etzwane in a measured voice. "You may be asked questions. I cannot suggest your responses, but be succinct and volunteer no information."

"I have nothing to hide," said Etzwane, somewhat curtly. "If I am questioned, I will answer as my best judgment advises."

Ifness made no reply.

The diligence halted in the shadow of an old-style observation tower. The two men alighted; Ifness led the way through a rank garden, across a courtyard paved with pale green marble, into the front hall of the manor. He halted and signaled Etzwane to do likewise. No sound was to be heard; the house seemed deserted. The air smelled of dust, dry wood, old varnish. A shaft of lavender afternoon light slanted down through a high window to play on a faded portrait of a child in the quaint costume of olden times...At the end of the hall a man appeared. For a moment he stood watching, then came a step forward. Ignoring Etzwane, he spoke to Ifness in a suave rhythmical language, to which Ifness made a brief reply. The two moved away and passed through a doorway; Etzwane unobtrusively followed, into a tall twelve-sided room paneled in snuff-brown madera and illuminated by six high bull's-eyes of dusty purple glass. Etzwane examined the man with candid interest. Could he be Dasconetta, living like a ghost in this ancient house? Strange, if not incredible. He was a strongly built man of middle size, abrupt but tightly controlled of movement. A pelt of glossy black hair formed a prow halfway down his high and

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**Pacer: a draught beast, evolved from bullocks brought to Durdane by the first settlers. Horses similarly imported died of gland fever or were killed by ahulphs.*

*†The construction of the glass city Garwiy was controlled by the Aesthetic Society, which eventually became a caste of hereditary nobility: the Aesthetes.*

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prominent forehead, then coved back from the temples, and again around the ears. His nose and chin were pallid; his mouth showed almost no lip whatever. After a single flash of his black eyes, he paid Etzwane no further attention.

Ifness and Dasconetta (if this were his identity) spoke in measured sentences, Ifness stating, Dasconetta acknowledging. Etzwane settled upon a camphorwood bench and watched the conversation. There was clearly no friendship between the two men. Ifness was not so much on the defensive as wary; Dasconetta listened attentively, as if matching each word against a previous statement or point of view. On one occasion Ifness half turned toward Etzwane, as if to command corroboration or to draw forth some special fact; Dasconetta halted him with a wry word.

Ifness set forth a demand, which Dasconetta rejected. Ifness persisted, and now Dasconetta performed a strange act: he reached behind him and by some unknown method brought into view a square four-foot panel composed of a thousand blinking white and gray shapes. Ifness made a set of remarks, to which Dasconetta gave a reply. Both examined the square panel, which blinked and flickered black, gray and white. Dasconetta turned back to face Ifness with a quiet smile.

The conversation continued another five minutes. Dasconetta spoke the final sentence; Ifness turned away, walked from the room. Etzwane followed.

Ifness marched silently back to the diligence. Etzwane, controlling his exasperation, asked: "What have you learned?"

"Nothing new. The policy group will not approve my plans."

Etzwane looked back at the old manor, wondering why Dasconetta would choose to make his headquarters here. He asked, "What then is to be done?"

"About what?"

"About a vehicle to take us to Caraz."

Ifness said in an offhand voice, "That is not my primary concern. Transportation can be contrived if and when needful."

Etzwane struggled to maintain an even voice. "What then was your 'primary concern'?"

"I suggested an investigation by agencies other than the Historical Institute. Dasconetta and his clique are unwilling to risk an adulteration of the environment. As you saw, Dasconetta was able to manipulate a consensus."

"What of Dasconetta? Does he reside permanently here in Wild Rose?" Ifness allowed a small twitch of a smile to his lips. "Dasconetta is far away, beyond

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the Schiafarilla. You saw his simula; he spoke to mine. The business is accomplished by a scientific method."

Etzwane looked back toward the old house. "And who is there?"

"No one. It is joined to a similar structure on the world Glantzen Five."

They climbed into the diligence, which set off toward Jamilo.

Etzwane said, "Your conduct is incomprehensible. Why did you assert that you could not take us to Caraz?"

"I made no such assertion," said Ifness. "You drew a faulty inference, for which I cannot accept responsibility. In any event the situation is more complicated than you suppose, and you must be prepared for subtlety."

"Subtlety or deception?" demanded Etzwane. "The effect is much the same."

Ifness held up his hand. "I will explain the situation, if only to reduce the flow of your reproaches... I conferred with Dasconetta neither to persuade him nor to requisition transportation, but, rather, to provoke his adoption of an incorrect policy. He has now made this error and, furthermore, obtained a consensus through the use of incomplete and subjective information. The way is now open for a demonstration to cut the ground out from under his feet. When now I make an investigation, I will be acting outside Standard Procedures, which will embarrass Dasconetta and catch him in a dilemma. He must commit himself even more completely to an obviously incorrect position or perform a humiliating reversal."

Etzwane gave a skeptical grunt. "Has not Dasconetta taken all this into consideration?"

"I think not. He would hardly have called for a consensus and argued from so rigid a position; he is sure of his case, which is based on Institute Regulation; he imagines me fretting and constrained. The opposite is true; he has opened the door upon a set of rewarding prospects."

Etzwane was unable to share Ifness' enthusiasm. "Only if the investigation yields significant results."

Ifness shrugged. "If the rumors are incorrect, I am no worse off than before, except for the stigma of the consensus, which Dasconetta planned in any event."

"I see...why did you take me to this encounter?"

"I hoped that Dasconetta might question you, in order to embarrass me further. He cautiously decided against this procedure."

"Hmmf." Etzwane was not flattered by the role which Ifness had laid out for him. "So now what do you plan?"

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"I intend to study the events which purportedly have occurred in Caraz. The affair puzzles me: why should the asutra test the Roguskhoi again? They are a faulty concept; why deploy them a second time? Who are the men who used energy weapons in the rumored battle? Certainly not Palasedrans, certainly not men of Shant. There is mystery here; I confess that I am tantalized. So, now tell me: exactly where did the rumored engagement occur? We will join forces for this particular investigation."

"Near the settlement Shillinsk, on the Keba River."

"I will check my references tonight. Tomorrow we will depart. There is no room for delay."

Etzwane became silent. The reality of the situation now faced him; he felt a mood of awe and presentiment. In a thoughtful voice he said, "I will be ready."

Late in the evening Etzwane once more called upon Aun Sharah, who showed no surprise to learn of Etzwane's plans. "I can supply another trifle — no, two trifles — of information. The first is negative, in that we have spoken to mariners from other shores of Caraz. None mention Roguskhoi. The second item is a rather vague report of spaceships, which might or might not have been sighted in the Orgai region, west of the Kuzi Kaza. The report goes no further than this. I wish you good luck and will anxiously await your return. I understand your motives, but I doubt if they would persuade me to venture into central Caraz."

Etzwane gave a hollow chuckle. "I have nothing better to do at the moment."

## Chapter 3

Etzwane arrived early at Fontenay's Inn. He wore a suit of gray hard-cloth, a jacket of water-repellent bast against the mists and rains of Caraz, ankle boots of chumpa leather. In his pouch he carried the energy gun Ifness had given him long ago.

Ifness was nowhere upon the premises. Once again Etzwane walked fretfully up and down the avenue. An hour passed; then a diligence drew up beside him. The driver signaled. "You are Gastel Etzwane? Please come with me."

Etzwane scrutinized the man with suspicion. "Where?"

"To a place north of the city; such are my instructions."

"Who instructed you?"

"A certain Ifness."

Etzwane entered the diligence. They drove north beside the Jardeen estuary, which presently spread wide to become the Sualle. The city fell behind; they followed a waterfront road through a dreary

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wasteland of rubble, nettles, sheds and warehouses, a few dilapidated cabins. At an ancient house built of slag bricks the diligence halted. The driver made a sign; Etzwane alighted. The diligence drove back the way it had come.

Etzwane knocked on the door of the house, evoking no response. He went around to the back, where at the foot of a rocky slope a boathouse extended over the water. Etzwane followed a path down the slope and looked into the boathouse to find Ifness loading parcels into a sailboat.

Etzwane stood wondering if Ifness had lost his faculties. To sail such a boat across the Green Ocean, around the north coast of Caraz to Erbol, thence up the Keba River to Burnoun was, to say the least, impractical, if for no other reason than the length of the journey.

Ifness seemed to read his mind. In a dry voice he said, "By the very nature of our research, we cannot fly grandly about Caraz in an air-yacht. Are you ready to depart? If so, step into the boat."

"I am ready." Etzwane took himself aboard the boat. Ifness cast off the mooring lines and pushed the boat out upon the face of the Sualle. "Be so good as to raise the sail."

Etzwane heaved upon the halyard; the sail billowed; the boat moved out upon the water. Etzwane seated himself gingerly upon a thwart and considered the receding shore. He glanced into the cabin at the parcels Ifness had brought aboard and wondered what they contained. Food and drink? Enough for three days, at the most a week. Etzwane shrugged and looked out over the Sualle. Suns'-light glinted from ten million cat's-paws, in thirty million pink, blue and white sparks. Astern rose the wonderful glass shapes of Garwiy, colors muted by distance. He might never see the glass towers of Garwiy again.

For an hour the boat sailed out upon the Sualle until the shores were indistinct and no other boats could be seen. Ifness said curtly, "You may lower the sail and then unship the mast."

Etzwane obeyed. Ifness meanwhile brought forth sections of transparent stuff which he fitted into a windscreen around the cockpit. Etzwane watched silently. Ifness made a last survey around the horizon, then raised the cover from a cuddy at the stern. Etzwane noticed a black panel, a set of white, red and blue knobs. Ifness made an adjustment. The boat lifted into the air, dripping water, then slanted into the sky. Ifness touched the knobs; the boat curved west, to fly high over the mud flats of Fenesq. Ifness said in a casual

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voice, "A boat is the least conspicuous vehicle in which to travel; it arouses attention nowhere, not even in Caraz."

"An ingenious artifice," said Etzwane.

Ifness nodded indifferently. "I lack accurate charts, and we must navigate by rule of thumb. Shant maps are only guesses. We will follow the Caraz coast to the mouth of the Keba River, something over two thousand miles, so I should reckon. We can then follow the Keba south without risk of losing our way."

Etzwane recalled the great map in the Jurisdictionary. In the general area of Shillinsk he had noticed several rivers: the Panjorek, the Blue Zura, the Black Zura, the Usak, the Bobol. To attempt an overland short-cut was to risk coming down upon the wrong river. He turned his attention down upon the flatlands of Canton Fenesq, tracing the canals and waterways which radiated from the four Fen towns. The cantonal border appeared in the distance: a line of black alyptus trees; beyond the bogs and moors of Canton Gitanesq extended into purple murk.

Ifness, crouching in the cabin, brewed a pot of tea. Sitting up under the forward screen, with wind hissing overhead, the two drank tea and ate nut cakes from one of the parcels Ifness had brought aboard. Etzwane thought that Ifness seemed relaxed and almost genial. To attempt a conversation was to risk rebuff, but now Ifness himself vouchsafed a remark. "Well, we are off in good style and without interference from any source."

"Did you expect any?"

"Not seriously. I doubt if the asutra maintain agents in Shant; the area can be of little real interest to them. Dasconetta might have placed an information with the Institute monitors, but I believe we were too quick for them."

"Your relationship with Dasconetta seems awkward indeed."

Ifness gave a nod of acquiescence. "In an organization such as the Institute, a Fellow achieves status by demonstrating judgment superior to that of his colleagues, particularly those who are reckoned astute. I have outmaneuvered Dasconetta so decisively that I begin to be worried: what is he up to? How can he thwart me without endorsing my viewpoint? It is a dangerous and subtle business."

Etzwane frowned sidewise at Ifness, whose motivations and attitudes, as usual, he found incomprehensible. "Dasconetta concerns me less than our work in Caraz, which perhaps is not so subtle but equally dangerous. Dasconetta, after all, is neither a

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ritual murderer nor a cannibal."

"Such acts have not been proved against him, certainly," said Ifness with a faint smile. "Well, well, perhaps you are right. I must turn my attention to Caraz. According to Kreposkin*, the region of the middle Keba is relatively placid, especially north of the Urt Unna foothills. Shillinsk would seem to lie within this area. He mentions river pirates and a local tribe, the Sorukh. On the river islands live the degenerate Gorioni, whom even the slavers ignore."

Below rose the Hurra Hills, and where the Cliffs of Day hurled back the swells of the Green Ocean, Shant came to an end. For an hour they flew over blank empty water, then at the horizon appeared a vague dark mark: Caraz. Etzwane stirred himself. Ifness sat with his back to the wind, cogitating over his notebook. Etzwane asked, "How do you propose to conduct the investigation?"

Ifness closed his notebook, looked over the side and around the sky before replying. "I have no specific plans. We are setting out to solve a mystery. First we must gather facts, then draw our conclusions. At the moment we know very little. The Roguskhoi seem to have been artificially developed as an antihuman weapon. The asutra who control them are a parasitical race, or, more sympathetically, might be said to live in symbiosis with their hosts. The Roguskhoi failed in Shant. Why do we find them in Caraz? To conquer territory? To guard a colony? Develop a resource? At the moment we can only wonder."

Caraz dominated the western horizon. Ifness swung the boat a point or two north and slanted gradually against the shoreline. Late in the afternoon mud flats appeared below, marked by tremulous wisps of surf. Ifness adjusted course and all night the boat drifted at half speed along the coast, following trails of phosphorescent foam. Predawn murk discovered the hulk of Cape Comranus ahead, and Ifness pronounced Kreposkin's maps worthless. "Essentially he informs us only that a Cape Comranus exists, that it is somewhere to be found along the Caraz shore. We must use these maps with skepticism."

All morning the boat followed the coast: past a succession of crouching headlands separated by mud flats. At noon they rose above a great finger of stone pointing fifty miles north, unidentified on Kreposkin's maps. The sea

*Kreposkin: Cartographer of the Kingdoms of Old Caraz.*

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returned; Ifness allowed the boat to descend until they drifted only a thousand feet above the beach.

Halfway through the afternoon they crossed the mouth of a vast river: the Gever, draining the Geverman Basin, into which the whole of Shant might be fitted. A village of a hundred stone cabins occupied the lee of a hill; a dozen boats swung at anchor. This was the first habitation they had seen on Caraz.

Persuaded by Kreposkin's map, Ifness turned the boat westward and inland, across a densely forested wilderness extending north past the reach of vision: the Mirv Peninsula. A hundred miles fell astern. From an almost invisible clearing a wisp of smoke lazed up into the air. Etzwane glimpsed three timber cabins, and for ten minutes he looked astern, wondering what sort of men and women lived lost in this northern forest of Caraz... Another hundred miles passed. They came to the far shore of the Mirv Peninsula, in this case to validate Kreposkin's map. Once again they flew over water. Ahead the estuary of the Hietze River opened into the land: a cleft twenty miles wide studded with steep-sided islands, each a miniature fairyland of delightful trees and mossy meadows. One of the islands supported a gray stone castle; beside another a cargo vessel lay moored.

During the late afternoon, clouds rolled down from the north; plum-colored gloom fell across the landscape. Ifness slowed the boat and upon consideration descended to a sheltered crescent of beach. As lightning began to lash the sky, Etzwane and Ifness rigged a tarpaulin over the cockpit; then, with rain drumming on the fabric, they drank tea and ate a meal of bread and meat. Etzwane asked, "Suppose the asutra attacked Durdane with spaceships and powerful weapons: what would the people of the Earth-worlds do? Would they send warships to protect us?"

Ifness leaned back against the thwart. "These are unpredictable matters. The Coordinating Board is a conservative group; the worlds are absorbed in their own affairs. The Pan-Humanic League is no longer influential, if ever it was. Durdane is far away and forgotten; the Schiafarilla intervenes. The Coordination might make a representation, depending upon a report from the Historical Institute, which enjoys prestige. Dasconetta, for purposes to which I have alluded, seeks to minimize the situation. He will not acknowledge that the asutra are the first technologically competent nonhuman creatures we have encountered, a highly important occasion."

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"Curious! The facts speak for themselves."

"True. But there is more to it, as you might guess. Dasconetta and his clique advocate caution and further research; in due course they propose to issue the announcement under their own aegis; I will never be mentioned. This scheme must be thwarted."

Etzwane, engaged in rueful reflections regarding the quality of Ifness' concern, went to look out into the night. The rain had dwindled to a few dark drops; the lightning flickered far to the east, back over the Mirv. Etzwane listened, but could hear no sound whatever. Ifness also stepped out to look at the night.

"We might proceed, but I am uncertain in regard to the Keba and the intervening rivers, Kreposkin is exasperating, in that he can neither be totally scorned nor totally trusted. Best that we wait for the light." He stood peering through the dark. "According to Kreposkin, yonder along the beach is the site of Suserane, a town built by the Shelm Fyrids some six thousand years ago... Caraz, then as now, was savage and vast. No matter how many enemies fell in battle, more always came. One or another warrior tribe laid Suserane waste; now there is nothing left: only the influences Kreposkin calls *esmeric*."

"I do not know that word."

"It derives from a dialect of old Caraz and means the association or atmosphere clinging to a place: the unseen ghosts, the dissipated sounds, the suffused glory, music, tragedy, exultation, grief and terror, which according to Kreposkin never dissipates."

Etzwane looked through the dark toward the site of the old city; if esmeric were present, it came but weakly through the dark. Etzwane returned to the boat and tried to sleep on the narrow starboard berth.

The morning sky was clear. The blue sun Etta swung up near the horizon, producing a false blue dawn, then pink Sassetta slanted sidewise into the sky, then white Zael, and again blue Etta. After a breakfast of tea and dried fruit, and a cursory glance at the site of old Suserane, Ifness took the boat into the air. Ahead, dull as lead in the light from the east, a great rivermouth gaped into the mass of Caraz. Ifness named the river the Usak. At noon they passed the Bobol and at midafternoon reached the mouth of the Keba, which Ifness identified by the chalk cliffs along the western shore and the trading post Erbol five miles inland.

Ifness swung south over the watercourse, here forty miles wide,

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with three sun trails across the brimming surface. The river seemed to curve somewhat to the right, then at the horizon's verge swept majestically back to the left. Three barges, minuscle from the height, floated on the face of the river, two inching upstream to the force of billowing square sails, another drifting downstream with the current.

"The charts are of small benefit henceforth," said Ifness. "Kreposkin mentions no settlements along the middle Keba, although he refers to the Sorukh race, a warlike folk who never turn their backs in battle."

Etzwane studied Kreposkin's rude maps. "Two thousand miles south along the river, into the Burnoun district: that would take us about here, to the Plain of Blue Flowers."

Ifness was not interested in Etzwane's opinions. "The maps are only approximations," he said crisply. "We will fly a certain distance, then undertake a local investigation." He closed the book and, turning away, became absorbed in his own thoughts.

Etzwane smiled a trifle grimly. He had become accustomed to Ifness' mannerisms and no longer allowed himself to become wrathful. He went forward and looked out over the tremendous purple forests, the pale-blue distances, to bogs and swamps of mottled green and, dominating the landscape, the flood of the river Keba. Here was where he had come, to wild Caraz, because he feared staleness and insipidity. What of Ifness? What had urged the fastidious Ifness to such vicissitudes? Etzwane started to ask the question, then held his tongue; Ifness would give a mordant answer, with Etzwane none the better informed.

Etzwane turned and looked south, into Caraz, where so many mysteries awaited illumination.

The boat flew all night, holding its course by the reflection of the blazing Schiafarilla upon the river. At noon Ifness lowered the boat toward the river, here running irregularly about ten miles wide, swelling, narrowing, and encompassing a myriad of wooded islands.

"Be on the lookout for habitation, or even better, a riverboat," Ifness told Etzwane. "We now require local information."

"How will you understand? The folk of Caraz speak an outlandish yammer."

"Nonetheless, we will manage, or so I believe," said Ifness in his most didactic drawl. "The Burnoun and the Keba Basin are linguis-

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tically uniform. The folk use a dialect derived from the language of Shant."

Etzwane looked sidewise in disbelief. "How can this be? Shant is far distant."

"The circumstance derives from the Third Palasedran War. Cantons Maseach, Gorgach and Parthe collaborated with the Eagle-Dukes, and many folk, dreading Pandamon vengeance, fled Shant. They made their way up the Keba and imposed their language on the Sorukhs, who ultimately enslaved them. The history of Caraz is far from cheerful." Ifness leaned over the gunwales and pointed to a straggle of huts on the riverbank, hardly to be seen behind a covert of tall reeds. "A village, where we can gain information, even if only negative." He reflected. "We will employ a harmless hoax to facilitate the matter. These people are indomitably superstitious and will enjoy a demonstration of their beliefs." He adjusted a dial; the boat slowed and hung motionless in midair. "Let us now ship the mast and raise the sail, then make a change or two in our costume."

Down from the sky floated the boat, sail billowing, with Etzwane at the tiller ostensibly steering. Both he and Ifness wore white turbans and carried themselves in a portentous manner. The boat settled upon the flat before the huts, still puddled from the rainstorm of two days before. A half dozen men stood stock-still; as many slatternly women peered from the doorways; naked children crawling in the mud froze in place, or backed whimpering away to shelter. Stepping from the boat, Ifness sprinkled a handful of blue and green glass gems upon the ground. He pointed to a portly elder who stood dumfounded at hand. "Approach, if you please," spoke Ifness in a coarse dialect, barely intelligible to Etzwane. "We are benevolent wizards and intend you no harm; we want information in regard to our ememies."

The old man's chin trembled, agitating his dirty whiskers; he clutched his ragged homespun tunic about his belly and essayed a few steps forward. "What information do you require? We are only clamdiggers, no more; we know nothing beyond the flow of the river."

"Just so," intoned Ifness. "Still, you are witness to comings and goings, and I notice a shed yonder for the storage of trade goods."

"Yes, we have modest dealings in clam cake, clam wine, and crushed clam shell of good quality. But for knowledge of loot or precious things you must ask elsewhere. Even the slavers pass us by."

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"We seek news of a tribe of invading warriors: large, red-skinned demons who slaughter men and copulate with the women, to notorious degree. These are the Roguskhoi. Have you had news regarding these folk?"

"They have not troubled us, the Sacred Eel be thanked. The traders tell us of fighting and an epic battle, but in all my life I have heard nothing else, and no one has used the name 'Roguskhoi.'"

"Where then was the fighting?"

The clam digger pointed south. "The Sorukh regions are still far: it is ten days' sail to the Plain of Blue Flowers, though your magic boat will speed you there in half the time ...Are you permitted to teach the lore which propels your craft? It would be a great convenience for me."

"Such a question best had not be asked," said Ifness. "We now proceed to the Plain of Blue Flowers."

"May the Eel expedite your passage."

Ifness stepped back into the boat, gave Etzwane a formal signal. Etzwane worked the rudder and adjusted the sheets, while Ifness touched his controls. The boat rose, the sails caught the wind, the boat sailed off across the river. The men ran down to the water's edge to stare after them, followed by the children and women from the huts.

Ifness chuckled. "We have made memorable at least one day of their lives and fractured a dozen rules of the Institute."

"Ten days' journey," mused Etzwane. "The barges move two or three miles an hour: fifty miles a day, more or less. Ten days journey would be five hundred miles."

"By just such a degree are Kreposkin's charts inaccurate." Standing up in the cockpit, Ifness raised his arm in a final flourish of benign farewell to the gaping folk of the village. A grove of waterwood trees hid them from sight. Ifness spoke over his shoulder to Etzwane, "Lower the sail, unship the mast."

Etzwane silently obeyed the command, reflecting that Ifness seemed to enjoy the role of wandering magician. The boat moved south up the river. Silver-trunked almacks lined the bank, their silver-purple fronds glinting green to the motion of the breeze. To right and left flatlands disappeared into the dove-dray haze of distance, and always the great Keba reached out ahead.

Afternoon waned; and the banks remained desolate of life, to Ifness' muttered disgust. The suns sank; twilight fell across the landscape. Ifness stood precariously on the foredeck, peering down into the dark. At last an array of flickering red sparks appeared

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on the riverbank. Ifness swung the boat around and down; the sparks became a dozen leaping campfires arrayed in a rough circle, twenty or thirty yards in diameter.

"Ship the mast," said Ifness. "Hoist the sail."

Etzwane thoughtfully appraised the fires, and the folk who worked within the circle of light. Beyond he glimpsed large carts with crooked eight-foot wheels and leather hoods; they had come upon a band of nomads, of a temperament presumably more edgy and truculent than the placid clam diggers. Etzwane looked dubiously toward Ifness, who stood like a statue. Very well, thought Etzwane, he would indulge Ifness in his mad jokes, even at the risk of flowing blood. He set up the mast, lifted the great square sail, then adjusting his turban, went back to the tiller.

The boat settled into the circle of firelight. Ifness called down, "Beware below, move aside."

The tribesmen looked up, jumping and cursing they sprang back. An old man tripped and spilled a tub of water upon a group of women, who screamed in fury.

The boat landed; Ifness with a stern mien held up his hand. "Quiet! We are only two wizards of the night. Have you never seen magic before? Where is the chief of the clan?"

No one spoke. The men, in loose white shirts, baggy black breeches and black boots, stood back uncertain whether to flee or attack. The women, in loose patterned gowns, wailed and showed the whites of their eyes.

"Who is the chief?" bawled Ifness. "Can he not hear? Can he not walk forward?"

A hulking black-browed man with black mustaches came slowly forward. "I am Rastipol, chief of the Ripchiks. What do you want of me?"

"Why are you here and not fighting the Roguskhoi?"

"'Roguskhoi'?" Rastipol blinked. "Who are they? We fight no one at this moment."

"The Roguskhoi are red demon-warriors. They are only half human, though they show enthusiasm for human women."

"I have heard of them. They fight the Sorukh; it is none of our affair. We are not Sorukh; we are out of the Melch race."

"And if they destroy the Sorukh, what next?"

Rastipol scratched his chin. "I have not considered the matter."

"Exactly where has the fighting occured?"

"Somewhere to the south, out on the Plain of Blue Flowers, or so I suppose."

"How far is this?"

"Four days to the south is Shillinsk Town, at the edge of the

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Plain. Can you not learn this by magic?"

Ifness raised a finger toward Etzwane. "Transform Rastipol into a sick ahulph."

"No, no," cried Rastipol. "You have misjudged me. I meant no harm."

Ifness gave a distant nod. "Guard your tongue; you allow it a dangerous freedom." He signaled Etzwane. "Sail on."

Etzwane worked the tiller and waved his hand toward the sail, while Ifness moved his dials. The boat lifted into the night sky as the Ripchiks watched silently from below.

During the night the boat drifted slowly south. Etzwane slept on one of the narrow berths; he was not aware whether or not Ifness did the same. In the morning, cold and cramped, he went out into the cockpit to find Ifness looking out over the gunwale. A mist concealed the land below, the boat floated alone between gray mist and lavender sky.

For an hour the two sat in dour silence, drinking tea. At last the three suns rolled high and the mist began to dissipate, swirling and drifting, revealing irregular districts of land and river. Below them, the Keba made a mighty swing to the west, where it was joined from the east by a tributary, the Shill. On the west bank three docks thrust out into the Keba, marking a settlement of fifty or sixty huts and a half dozen larger structures. Ifness exclaimed in satisfaction. "Shillinsk at last! It exists in spite of Kreposkin!" He lowered the boat to the face of the water. Etzwane stepped the mast and hoisted the sail; the boat proceeded across the water to the docks. Ifness brought the boat up the water steps; Etzwane jumped ashore with a line; Ifness followed more deliberately. Etzwane paid out the line; the boat drifted downstream and took a place among a dozen fishing smacks, not notably different from itself. Ifness and Etzwane turned toward Shillinsk Town.

## Chapter 4

The cabins and sheds of Shillinsk were built from gray stone quarried from a nearby ledge and rough-laid between balks of driftwood. Directly behind the docks stood the Shillinsk Inn, a relatively imposing structure of three stories. Lavender suns'-light glared on gray stone and black timber; the shadows, by some ocular accomodation, seemed green, the color of old water in a barrel.

Shillinsk Town seemed quiet, only half alive. No sound could be heard except the lap of waves along the shore. Two women walked

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slowly along the shore; they wore baggy black breeches, blouses of dark purple, head kerchiefs of rich rust-orange. Three barges lay alongside the docks, one empty and two partially laden. Several barge tenders were bound for the tavern; Ifness and Etzwane followed a few paces to the rear.

The barge tenders pushed through the driftwood doors, with Ifness and Etzwane behind them, into a common room considerably more comfortable than the rude exterior suggested. A fire of sea coal blazed in a huge fireplace; the walls had been plastered, white-washed and decorated with festoons and rosettes of carved wood. A group of barge tenders sat before the fire eating a stew of fish and reed-root. To the side, half in the shadows, two men of the district sat hunched over their wooden mugs. Firelight molded their slab-sided faces; they spoke little and peered distrustfully sidewise, watching the barge tenders. One displayed a black mustache bushy as a dust brush, the other wore both a chin beard and a two-inch copper nose ring. With fascination Etzwane saw him knock up the ring with the rim of his mug and drink. They wore the Sorukh costume: black breeches, loose shirts embroidered with fetish signs and from their waist hung scimitars of the white metal *ghisim:* an allow of silver, platinum, tin and copper, forged and hardened by a secret process.

Ifness and Etzwane settled at a table near the fire. The innkeeper, a man bald and flat-faced, with a deformed leg and a hard stare, hobbled over to learn their wants. Ifness spoke for lodging and the best meal available. The innkeeper announced that he could serve clam soup, herbs and sweet beetles, grilled meat with water-greens, bread, blue-flower marmalade, and vervain tea: a meal which Ifness had not expected and which he pronounced satisfactory.

"I must discuss my recompense," said the innkeeper. "What do you have to trade?"

Ifness brough forth one of his glass jewels. "This."

The innkeeper drew back and showed the palm of his hand in disdain. "What do you take me for? This is no more than coarse glass, a bauble for children."

"Indeed, then," said Ifness. "What is its color?"

"It is the color of old grass, verging toward river water."

"Look." Ifness closed the gem in his hand, then opened it. "What color now?"

"A clear crimson!"

"And now?" Ifness exposed the gem to the warmth of the fire, and it glinted green as an emerald. "Now take it into the dark and tell

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me what you see."

The innkeeper went off to a closet and presently returned. "It shines blue and sends off rays of several colors."

"The object is a starstone," said Ifness. "Such are occasionally taken from the center of meteorites. It is in fact too valuable to exchange for mere food and lodging, but we have nothing else."

"It will suffice, or so I suppose," stated the landlord in a pompous voice. "How long does your barge remain at Shillinsk?"

"Several days until we conclude our business. We deal in exotic goods, and at this moment we require the neck bones of dead Roguskhoi, which have a medicinal efficacy."

" 'Roguskhoi'? What are they?"

"You call them differently. I refer to the red half-human warriors which have pillaged the Plain of Blue Flowers."

"Ah! We call them the 'Red Devils.' They are of value after all?"

"I make no assertions; I merely traffic in bones. Who would be the local dealer in such merchandise?"

The inkeeper uttered a coarse bark of laughter, which he quickly stifled, and turned a look toward the two Sorukh, who had been attending the conversation.

"In these parts," said the innkeeper, "bones are so common as to be worthless, and a man's life is at little greater price. Observe this leg which my mother maimed to protect me from the slave takers. They were then the Esche from the Murd Mountains across the Shill. Now the Esche are gone and Hulkas have come, and all is as before, or worse. Never turn your back to a Hulka, or you'll find a chain around your neck. Four from Shillinsk have been taken during this last year. Hulka or Red Devil, which is worse? Take your choice."

The mustached Sorukh suddenly joined the talk. "The Red Devils are extinct, except for their bones, which as you know belong to us."

"Precisely the case," declared the second Sorukh, the ring swinging against his lip as he spoke. "We know the therapeutic effect of Red Devil bones, and we intend to realize a fair profit."

"All very well," said Ifness, "but why do you assert their extinction?"

"The matter is common knowledge across the Plain."

"And who accomplished this act?"

The Sorukh tugged at his beard. "The Hulkas perhaps, or a band from over the Kuzi Kaza. It seems that magic was worked on both sides."

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"The Hulkas lack magic," remarked the innkeeper. "They are ordinary slavers. The tribes beyond the Kuzi Kaza are ferocious, but I have never heard magic ascribed to them."

The ring-nosed Sorukh made a sudden harsh gesture. "This is not germane." He turned to Ifness. "Do you intend to buy our bones, or shall we take them elsewhere?"

"I naturally want to inspect them," said Ifness. "Let us go look, then we can talk more to the point."

The Sorukhs sat back in shock. "Here is absurdity taken to the point of offense. Do you think we carry merchandise on our backs like Tshark women? We are proud folk and resent an affront!"

"I intended no offense," said Ifness. "I merely expressed a desire to see the merchandise. Where is it stored?"

"Let us make a short matter of the situation," said the Sorukh with the mustache. "The bones remain at the battlefield, or so I suppose. We will sell our interest for a modest trade, and then you can do what you wish with the bones."

Ifness thought a moment. "This procedure is scarcely to my advantage. What if the bones are of poor quality? Or impossible to transport? Either bring the bones here or conduct us to the bones, so that I may judge their value."

The Sorukhs became glum. Turning aside, they muttered together. Ifness and Etzwane set upon the food served by the innkeeper. Etzwane, glancing toward the Sorukhs, said, "They are only planning how best to murder us and take our wealth."

Ifness nodded. "They are also puzzled why we are not more concerned; they fear an unexpected trick. Still, they will never reject the bait."

The Sorukhs reached a decision and watched through heavy-lidded eyes until Etzwane and Ifness had finished their meal, whereupon the Sorukhs moved to the adjoining table, bringing with them an organic waft. Ifness shifted position and regarded the two with his head thrown back. The Sorukh with the mustache essayed a friendly smile. "Matters can be arranged to a mutual benefit. You are prepared to inspect the bones and pay for them on the spot?"

"Definitely not," said Ifness. "I will examine the bones and inform you if they are worth the transport here to Shillinsk."

The Sorukh's smile lingered a second or two, then vanished. Ifness went on. "Can you provide transportation? A comfortable cart drawn by pacers?"

The Sorukh with the ring in his nose gave a snort of disdain. "That is not possible," said the Sorukh

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with the mustache. "The Kuzi Kaza would break up the cart."

"Very well then, we will require riding pacers."

The Sorukhs drew back. They muttered together, the ring-nosed man surly and unwilling, the man with the mustache first urgent, then persuasive, then compelling; and finally he had his way. They returned to Ifness and Etzwane. "When will you be ready to depart?" asked the mustached man.

"Tomorrow morning, as early as feasible."

"At sunrise we will be ready. But a further important matter: you must pay a rent for the pacers."

"Ridiculous on the face of it!" scoffed Ifness. "I am not even sure that the bones exist! And you expect me to pay out rent on what might be a wild goose chase? By no means, I was not born yesterday."

The ring-nosed Sorukh started to make an angry argument, but the mustached man held up his hand. "You will see the bones, and the pacer rent will be absorbed in the ultimate transaction."

"That is more to the point," said Ifness. "Upon our return to Shillinsk we will arrange an inclusive price."

"At sunrise we depart; be ready." The two Sorukhs departed the inn; Ifness sipped hot infusion from a wooden bowl.

Etzwane demanded, "You plan to ride the plain on a pacer? Why not fly the boat?"

Ifness raised his eyebrows. "Is the matter not self-evident? A boat in the middle of a dry plain is a conspicuous object. We would have no freedom of action; we could never leave the boat."

"If we leave the boat at Shillinsk, we will certainly never see it again," grumbled Etzwane. "These people are thieves, one and all."

"I will make certain arrangements." Ifness considered a moment, then crossed the room and spoke with the innkeeper. He returned and resumed his seat at the table. "The innkeeper declares that we might leave ten treasure chests aboard our boat, without fear of molestation. He accepts full responsibility, and the risk is thereby reduced." Ifness mused a moment or two upon the flames of the fire. "Nevertheless, I will arrange a warning device, to discourage those pilferers who might escape his vigilance."

Etzwane, who had no taste for an arduous ride across the Plain of Blue Flowers in company with the Sorukhs, said sourly, "Instead of a flying boat, you should have contrived a flying cart, or a pair of flying pacers."

"Your concepts have merit," said Ifness benignly.

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For the repose of its patrons the inn provided boxes filled with straw in a row of small chambers on the second floor. Etzwane's cubicle commanded a view of the harbor. The straw, however, was not fresh; during the night it rustled with obscure activity, and the previous occupant had urinated in a corner of the room. At midnight Etzwane, aroused by a sound, went to look out the window. He noticed furtive motion along the dock, near the area where the boat was moored. The starlight was too dim for precise vision, but Etzwane noticed a hobbling irregularity in the gait of the skulker. The man stepped into a dinghy and rowed quietly out to the boat. He shipped his oars, made fast the dinghy and clambered aboard the boat, to be instantly surrounded by tongues of blue flame, while sparks jumped from his hair to the rigging. The man danced across the deck and more by accident than design plunged overboard. A few moments later he feebly hauled himself into his dinghy and rowed back to the dock.

At sunrise Etzwane arose from his straw and went to the first-floor washroom, where he found Ifness showed no great surprise. "I will see to the matter."

For breakfast the innkeeper served only tea and bread. His limp was more pronounced than ever, and he glowered spitefully toward Ifness as he banged the food down upon the table.

Ifness said sternly, "This is spartan fare; are you so exhausted from your foray that you cannot provide a suitable breakfast?"

The innkeeper attempted a blustering retort, but Ifness cut him short. "Do you know why you are here now, instead of dancing to the music of blue sparks? Because I require a satisfactory breakfast. Need I say more?"

"I have heard enough," muttered the innkeeper. He hobbled back into the kitchen and presently brough forth a cauldron of stewed fish, a tray of oatcake and eel jelly. "Will this appease your appetite? If not, I can furnish some good boiled ermink and a sack of cheese."

"We have enough," said Ifness. "Remember, if on my return, if I find so much as a splinter of the boat disarranged, you shall dance again to the blue music."

"You misinterpret my zeal," declared the innkeeper. "I rowed out to the boat because I thought I heard a suspicious noise."

"The matter is at an end," said Ifness indifferently, "so long as now we understand each other."

The two Sorukhs looked into the inn. "Are you ready to depart? The pacers are waiting."

Etzwane and Ifness went out into the cool morning. Four pacers pulled nervously at their curbs,

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hooking and slashing with back-curved horns. Etzwane considered them of good stock, long-limbed and deep-chested. They were equipped with nomad steppe saddles of chumpa* leather, with pouches for food and a rack on which a tent, blanket and night boots might be lashed. The Sorukhs refused to provide these articles for Ifness and Etzwane. Threats and persuasion had no effect, and Ifness was forced to part with another of his multi colored jewels before the requisite food and equipment were supplied.

Before departure Ifness required the identities of the two Sorukhs. Both were of the Bellbird fetish in the Varsk clan. Ifness wrote the names in blue ink upon a strip of parchment. He added a set of marks in crimson and yellow, while the Sorukhs looked on uneasily. "Why do you do this?" challenged Srenka.

"I take ordinary precautions," said Ifness. "I have left my jewels in a secret place, and I now carry no valuables; search me if you care to do so. I have worked a curse upon your names, which I will lift in good time. Your plans to murder and rob us are unwise and had best be dismissed."

*Chumpa: a large indigenous animal simlar to the quasi-biped ahulphs, but less intelligent and characterized by a ferocious disposition.*

Gulshe and Srenka scowled at what was obviously an unpleasant turn of events. "Shall we be on our way?" suggested Ifness.

The four mounted and set off across the Plain of Blue Flowers.

The Keba with its fringe of almacks receded and as last was lost to sight. To all sides the plain rolled in great sweeps and swells out into the sunny lavender haze. Purple moss padded the soil; shrubs held aloft flowers which colored the plain a soft sea-blue in all directions. To the south appeared an almost imperceptible shadow of mountains.

All day the four men rode, and at nightfall made camp in a shallow swale beside a trickle of dank water. They sat around the fire in an atmosphere of guarded cordiality. It developed that Gulshe himself had skirmished with a band of the Roguskhoi only two months previously. "They came down out of the Orgai Mountains, not far from Shagfe, where the Hulka maintain a slave depot. The Red Devils had raided the slave depot twice before, killing men and carrying off the women, and Hozman Sore-throat, the agent, sought to protect his property. He offered a half pound of iron for each Red Devil hand we brough back. I and two dozen others went forth to gain wealth, but we achieved nothing. The Devils

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ignore arrows, and each is worth ten men in a close fight, and so we returned to Shagfe without trophies. I rode east to Shillinsk for the Varsk conclave and saw nothing of the great battle in which the Red Devils were destroyed."

Ifness asked in a voice of mild interest, "Am I to understand that the Hulka defeated the Red Devils? How is this possible, if each Devil is worth ten men?"

Gulshe spat into the flames but made no reply. Srenka leaned forward to push a stick into the coals, the ring in his nose flickering with orange reflections. "It is said that magic weapons were used."

"By the Hulka? Where would they get magic weapons?"

"The warriors who destroyed the Red Devils were not Hulka."

"Indeed. Who were they then?"

"I know nothing of the matter; I was at Shillinsk."

Ifness pursued the subject no further. Etzwane rose to his feet and climbing to the top of the rise, looked around the horizon. He saw only darkness. He listened, but could hear no sound. The night was fine; there seemed no threat from chumpa or bad ahulphs. The two Sorukhs were another matter. The same thought had occurred to Ifness, who now went to kneel before the fire. He blew up a blaze, then holding his hands to either side, made the flames jump back and forth while the Sorukhs stared in amazement. "What are you doing:" asked Gulshe in awe.

"A trifle of magic for my protection. I lay a command upon the fire-spirit, to enter the liver of all who wish me harm, and there abide."

Srenka pulled at his nose ring. "Are you a true magician?"

Ifness laughed. "Do you doubt it? Hold out your hand."

Srenka cautiously extended his arm. Ifness pointed his finger, and a crackling blue spark leapt to Srenka's hand. Srenka emitted a ridiculous falsetto squawk of astonishment and jerked back speechless. Gulshe sprang erect and hurriedly retreated from the fire.

"That is nothing," said Ifness. "Only a trifle. You are still alive, are you not? So, then, we will sleep securely, all of us, knowing that magic guards us from harm."

Etzwane spread his blanket and bedded himself down. After a mutter or two Gulshe and Srenka arranged their own gear somewhat off to the side near the tethered pacers. Ifness was more deliberate and sat for half an hour staring into the dying fire. At last he took himself to his own bed. For half an hour Etzwane watched the glitter of Gulshe's and Srenka's eyes from the shadow of their hoods; then he dozed and slept.

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The second day was like the first. In the middle afternoon of the third day the foothills of the Kuzi Kaza came down to meet the plain. Gulshe and Srenka took counsel and established landmarks for themselves. By nightfall they had reached a desolate upland region of limestone cliffs and pinnacles. Camp was made beside a great sinkhole of dark mirror-smooth water. "We are now in the Hulka land," Gulshe told Ifness. "If we are est upon, our best safety is flight, in four different directions unless by magic you are able to ensure our defense."

"We will act as circumstances direct," said Ifness. "Where are the Red Devil bones?"

"Not far distant: beyond the ridge. Can you not sense the presence of so much death?"

Ifness responded in a measured voice: "An intellect in full control of itself unfortunately must sacrifice that receptivity which distinguishes the primitive mentality. This is an evolutionary step I have, on the whole, been happy to make."

Srenka tugged at his nose ring, uncertain whether or not Ifness had spoken in disparagement. He look at Gulshe; they gave each other shrugs of perplexity, then went to their beds where they muttered together for half an hour. Srenka seemed to be urging some action which Gulshe resisted; Srenka grumbled raucously; Gulshe made an ameliorative statement and both fell silent.

Etzwane sought his own blanket where he lay wakeful, uneasy for reasons beyond his understanding. "Perhaps," he told himself, "my mentality is primitive and credulous."

During the night he awoke often to lie listening and once heard the bickering of distant ahulphs. Another time a far mellifluous hooting reverberated through the stone defiles, to send eerie shudders along Etzwane's skin; it was a sound he could not identify. He had no awareness of returning to sleep, but when he next became aware, the sky glowed lavender to the approach of the three suns.

After a glum breakfast of dried fruit and tea, the four set forth again, passing through a series of limestone defiles, then out upon a high meadow. They rode through a forest of gallows trees, then up a barren valley. A five hundred-foot crag loomed above them, with the parapets of a ruined castle at the crest. Gulshe and Srenka halted to consider the trail ahead. "Is the castle inhabited?" Etzwane asked.

"Who knows?" growled Gulshe. "Enough such places exist, with rogues and murderers waiting to roll down a rock, that the traveler must take care."

Srenka pointed a crooked

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finger. "Lyre birds fly above the stones; the way may be considered safe."

"How far now to the battlefield?" asked Ifness.

"An hour's ride, around the root of yonder mountain . . . Come now, at a fast pace. Lyre birds or not, I mistrust these old bandit dens."

The four rode forward at a smart gait, but the ruined castle offered no menace, and the lyre birds soared as before.

The four rode down from the pass. Gulshe pointed toward the great mountain, hunching like a sullen beast over the plain below. "Thence the Red Devils came, on their way to Shagfe there, to the north, you can barely see the Shagfe stockade. Early in the morning the men attacked from positions they had taken during the night, and the Red Devils were encircled. The battle lasted two hours, and all the Red Devils were dead, with all their captive women and imps, and the band which had destroyed them marched south and was seen no more, a great mystery . . . There! The place where the Red Devils camped. The battle raged in this vicinity. Ah! Smell the carrion!"

"What of the bones?" inquired Srenka with a sly grin. "Do they meet your expectations?"

Ifness rode forward across the scene of carnage. Roguskhoi corpses lay everywhere, in a clutter of twisted limbs and contorted postures. Decomposition was far advanced; ahulphs had toyed with the idea of devouring the black flesh, and some had died from the experiment; these lay curled in furry balls down the slope.

Ifness rode in a great circle, gazing intently down at the corpses, sometimes halting to study one or another of the stinking red shapes at length. Etzwane halted his pacer somewhat to the side where he could watch the Sorukhs. Ifness rode up and halted beside Etzwane. "What do you make of the situation?"

"Like yourself, I am puzzled," said Etzwane.

Ifness looked, eyebrows disapprovingly high. "Why then am I puzzled?"

"Because of the wounds, which are not those of swords or cudgels."

"Hmmf. What else have you noticed?"

Etzwane pointed. "He with chain bib yonder appears to be a chieftain. He has suffered damage to his chest. The asutra he carried was destroyed. I noticed another dead chieftain across the field, and he carried a similar wound. The men who killed the Roguskhoi, like ourselves, knew of the asutra."

Ifness gave a curt nod of the head. "So it would seem."

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The Sorukh approached, wearing artificial smiles. "The bones then," Srenka put forward, "what of all these fine bones?"

"They are obviously not in salable condition," said Ifness. "I can make no firm offer until you clean and dry them, make up standard bales and convey them to the Shillinsk dock."

Gulshe gave his flowing mustache a sad tug; Srenka was less controlled. "I feared such duplicity!" he cried. "We have no guarantee of profit; we have invested time and property to no avail, and I for one will not let the matter rest on these terms."

Ifness said coldly, "Upon our return to Shillinsk I will compensate you and your comrade generously; as you point out, you have done your best. However, I cannot undertake to buy a field full of corpses in order to gratify your avarice. You must find another customer."

Srenka twisted his face into a ferocious grimace, his lower canine tusks gripping his nose ring. Gulshe warned him with a gesture. "The protests are reasonable. Our friend understandably cannot burden himself with merchandise in its present condition. I am certain that a mutually profitable arrangement is possible. In a year the bones will be well weathered and in prime condition, or we might rent slaves to boil and strip the carcasses. In the meantime let us leave this foul place; I feel a presentiment." presentiment."

"To Shagfe then," growled Srenka. "At Shagfe I plan to drink a crock of Baba's cellar-brew."

"A moment," said Ifness, scrutinizing the hillside. "I am interested in the band which destroyed the Red Devils. Where did they go after the victory?"

"Back the way they had come," sneered Srenka. "Where else?"

"They did not visit Shagfe?"

"At Shagfe you can make your own inquiries."

Etzwane said, "Ahulphs might track them."

"They are a month gone and far away," said Ifness. "The effort might well be tedious."

"In Shagfe we will undoubtedly hear news," suggested Gulshe.

"To Shagfe then," said Srenka. "I thirst for old Baba's cellar-brew."

Ifness turned a reflective glance toward Shagfe. Gulshe and Srenka already were riding down the long slope. They halted and looked back. "Come along then; the day will not last forever; yonder is Shagfe!"

"Very well," said Ifness. "We will visit Shagfe."

Shagfe, a dreary and unprepossessing settlement, baked in the

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lavender sunlight. Rude mud huts straggled along a wind-scoured street; behind was a scatter of leather tents. A rambling flat-roofed structure of mud and wattle dominated the town: the inn and grog shop. A clattering windmill nearby drew water into a tank, which overflowed into a trough; here sat a band of ahulphs who had come to drink. They had brought rock crystals and already had bartered for rags of yellow cloth which they wore rakishly tied to their hearing knobs.

Riding into Shagfe the four passed the slave pens: a complex of three sheds and three fenced yards in which a score of men, as many women, and several dozen blank-eyed children were confined.

Ifness, drawing his pacer to a halt, turned to Gulshe. "Who are these captives: local persons?"

Gulshe examined the group without interest. "They appear to be strangers, probably excess folk sold by the hetman of their clan. They might be persons taken in raids beyond the mountains. Or they might be persons seized and sold by private enterprises." Gulshe gave a curious choked chuckle. "In short, they are anyone unable to prevent otherwise. Here there is no one to say us nay, and each man must see to his own welfare."

"Such an existence is unpleasant," said Etzwane in disgust.

Gulshe looked at him without comprehension and turned to Ifness as if questioning Etzwane's sanity; Ifness smiled grimly. "Who buys the slaves?"

Gulshe shrugged. "Hozman Sore-throat takes them all, and pays a good weight of metal in the bargain."

"You are very knowledgeable in this regard," said Etzwane in a dour voice.

Srenka said, "And what of that? Do you begrudge us a livelihood? Perhaps the time has come for an understanding."

"Yes," said Gulshe, "the time has come." He brought forth a heavy-bladed knife of polished black glass. "Magic is not proof against my knife, and I can split either of you as if you were melons. Dismount from the pacers and stand facing the pens."

Ifness asked in a mild voice, "Am I to understand that you intend us an inconvenience?"

"We are men of trade," Srenka declared in a boisterous voice. "We live for profit. If we cannot sell bones, we will sell slaves, and for this reason we have brought you to Shagfe. I likewise am adept with the throwing knife. Dismount!"

"It is humiliating to be captured directly in front of the slave pens," said Ifness. "You show no regard for our sensibilities, and if for this reason alone, we refuse to

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gratify your wishes."

Srenka guffawed. Gulshe allowed a yellow line of teeth to show below his mustache. "Dismount, to the ground, and promptly!"

Etzwane spoke softly, "Have you forgotten the curse imposed at Shillinsk?"

"Hundreds of curses already ride our backs; what harm is another?" Gulshe jerked his knife. "Dismount."

Ifness shrugged. "Well, then, if we must, we must . . . Destiny plays strange tricks." Alighting wearily, he placed his hand on the pacer's haunch. The pacer roared in pain and sprang forward, into Gulshe's pacer, toppling the beast to the ground. Srenka flung his knife at Etzwane, who had dropped to the ground; the knife cut the air a foot over his shoulder. Ifness reached up, grasped Srenka's nose ring. Srenka emitted a quivering hiss which would have been a scream had he been able to articulate. "Hold him by the ring," Ifness instructed Etzwane. "Keep him in a state of compliance." Ifness went to where Gulshe, scrambling, cursing, clawing at the ground, attempted to gain his feet. Ifness laid a comradely hand on Gulshe's shoulder; Gulshe gave a spasmodic jerk and fell once more to the ground. "I fear I must take your knife," said Ifness. "You will not need it again."

Etzwane and Ifness continued toward the mud and wattle inn, leading the riderless beasts. Ifness said, "Six ounces of silver for two able individuals; it seems no great sum. Perhaps we were gulled. But no matter, in any event. Gulshe and Srenka will profit greatly by learning another facet to the slavery trade...I could almost wish that... But no! It is uncharitable to think of my colleague Dasconetta in this connection. In a way I regret the parting of ways with Gulshe and Srenka. They were picturesque companions."

Etzwane looked back over his shoulder to the slave pens. Except for Ifness' energy pack, he would be now peering forth from between the withes. Still these were the risks he had weighed in Garwiy; he had elected to face them rather than pursue a life of security, music and ease...Ifness was speaking, as much to himself as to Etzwane: "I regret only that we failed to learn more from Gulshe and Srenka... Well, here we are at the hostelry. In retrospect the inn at Shillinsk seems a haven of palatial luxury. We will represent ourselves not as wizards nor research students, nor even bone merchants. The most prestigious occupation at Shagfe is slavery, and slavery shall be our trade."

At the inn they paused to survey the settlement. The afternoon was

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warm and placid: infants crawled in the dirt; older children played at slave taking among the tents, leaping forth with ropes to drag away their captives. At the trough under the windmill three squat dark-haired women in leather pants and straw capes bickered with the ahulphs. The women carried sticks and struck at the ahulphs' long sensitive feet whenever they attempted to drink: the ahulphs in turn kicked dirt at the women and screamed abuse. Beside the road a dozen crones in shapeless straw cloaks huddled beside offerings of goods to be traded: mounds of dark-red meal, thongs of dried meat, blue-black finger grubs in boxes of wet moss, fat green beetles tethered to stakes, sugar pods, boiled birds, cardamoms, salt crusts. Above, the vast bright sky; to all sides, the hot flat plain; far in the east, a band of riders, visible only as a vibration of black specks, with a thin plume of lavender dust above . . . Ifness and Etzwane approached the inn and entered by a hole in the mud wall. The common room was dim and dank smelling. A rack behind the counter supported three barrels; elsewhere were benches and stools where half a dozen men sat with earthenware bowls of sour seed-wine or mugs of famous Shagfe cellar-brew. Conversation halted; the men stared at Ifness and Etzwane with a still intensity. The sole illumination was the purple glare of outdoors seeping through the door hole. Ifness and Etzwane peered around the room while their eyes adjusted to the dimness.

A short bare-chested man with long white hair ambled forward. He wore a leather apron and knee boots and was apparently Baba the proprietor. In a rough dialect he inquired their needs, which Etzwane understood more through divination than comprehension.

Ifness responded in a fair simulation of the dialect. "What sort of lodging are you able to provide us?"

"The best to be had in Shagfe," declared Baba the innkeeper. "Anyone will tell you as much. Is your question motivated by sheer curiosity?"

"No," replied Ifness. "You may show us the best that you have to offer."

"That is simple enough," said Baba. "This way, if you please." He led them down an ill-smelling corridor, past a rudimentary kitchen where a great kettle of porridge simmered over a fire, and into a bare courtyard, sheltered around the periphery by an overhanging roof. "Select whatever area you wish. The rain generally sweeps in from the south, and the south bay is the driest."

Ifness nodded gravely. "The

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lodging is adequate. What of our pacers?"

"I will take them to my stable and feed them hay, provided that you make suitable recompense. How long is your stay?"

"A day or two, or even longer, depending upon the transaction of our business. We are slave traders with a commission to buy a dozen stout Red Devils to row the galley of an east coast potentate. We understand, however, that the Red Devils have all been killed, which is sad news to hear."

"Your misfortune is my great good luck, for they were on the march toward Shagfe and might well have destroyed my hostelry."

"Perhaps the conquerors took captives?"

"I believe not, but in the common room sits Fabrache the Lucky Little Survivor. He claims to have witnessed a battle, and who is to doubt his word? If you were to provide a mug or two or cellar-brew, his tongue would wag freely, I vouch for this."

"A happy thought. Now, as to the fee for shelter and food, for us and our pacers . . ."

The haggling proceeded, Ifness driving a hard bargain in order to avoid a reputation for open-handedness. After five minutes a value defined as two ounces of silver was placed upon high-quality food and lodging for a period of five days.

"Very good then," said Ifness, "though as usual I have allowed a skillful rhetorician to persuade me into foolish extravagance. Let us now confer with Fabrache the Lucky Little Survivor. How did he gain this unusual cognomen?"

"It is no more than a child's pet name. Three times as an infant his mother attempted to drown him, and each time he pushed up through the mud. She gave up her task in disgust and even bestowed the diminutive upon him. He became a man without fear; he reasonably argues that if Gaspard the God desired his death, he would not have overlooked this early oppportunity . . ."

Baba led the way back to the common room. He called, "I introduce to the company the noble Ifness and Etzwane, who have come to Shagfe to buy slaves."

A man to the side gave a dispirited moan. "So now they compete with Hozman Sore-throat to drive prices still higher?"

"Hozman Sore-throat has bid for no Red Devils, which these traders require." Baba the innkeeper turned to a tall thin man with a long dismal face and a beard hanging below his chin like an icicle of black hair. "Fabrache, what are the facts? How many Red Devils still survive?"

Fabrache responded with the deliberation of an obstinate man.

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"The Red Devils are extinct in the Mirkil district, which is to say, in the neighborhood of Shagfe. I spoke with men of the Tchark Race from south of the Kuzi Kaza; they reported that the Red Devil bands had joined into a single horde, which then had marched north. Two days later I watched an army of magicians destroy this horde. Each Red Devil was killed and then rekilled: an astounding sight which I will never forget."

"The magic army took no captives?" asked Ifness.

"None. They destroyed the Red Devils and marched away into the east. I descended to the battlefield to salvage metal, but ahulphs had preceded me and every ounce was pre-empted. But this is not all my tale. As I turned toward Shagfe, I saw a great ship lift into the air, light as fluff, and disappear behind the clouds."

"A miraculous vision!" declared Ifness. "Innkeeper, supply this man a mug of cellar-brew."

Etzwane asked, "Was the ship round as a disk and the color of copper-bronze?"

Fabrache the Lucky Little Survivor made a negative sign. "This was an impressive black globe. The copper disks you mention were seen at the great battle of space ships; the disks and the black globes fought together."

Ifness nodded gravely and darted a warning glance toward Etzwane. "We have heard something of this battle. Eight copper ships engaged six black globes at a place whose name I forget."

The others in the room hastened to contradict him. "Your information is inaccurate. Four of the black globes attacked two of the copper disks, and the copper ships were broken into fragments."

"I wonder if we refer to the same battle," Ifness mused. "When did your affair occur?"

"Only two days ago; we have spoken of little else since. Such events have never before occurred in the Mirkil district."

"Where did this battle take place?" asked Ifness.

"Over yonder in the Orgai Mountains," said Fabrache. "Behind the Thrie Orgai, or so it is said; I have not been there myself."

"Think of it, so close to Shagfe!" exclaimed Baba the innkeeper. "Hardly two days ride on a sound pacer!"

"We are traveling in that direction," said Ifness. "I would like to inspect the locality." He addressed the Lucky Little Survivor. "Would you care to act as our guide?"

Fabrache tugged at his beard. He glanced aside at one of his fellows. "What is the news of the Gogursk clan? Have they made their west-faring?"

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"No fear for the Gogursks," said his friend. "This year they drive south to Lake Urman for crabs. The Orgai is empty of threat, except naturally for the predations of Hozman Sore-throat."

From outside the inn sounded a thud of hooves, the creaking of leather, hoarse voices. The landlord looked out through the doorway and spoke over his shoulder: "Kash Blue-worms."

At this two of the men present rose quickly and departed by the back corridor. Another called out, "Fabrache, what of you? Did you not take four Blue-worm girls to Hozman?"

"I am not one to discuss my business in public," said the Lucky Little Survivor. "In any case, the incident occurred last year."

The tribesmen entered the room. After glaring through the dimness, they strode to tables and rapped on the planks for drink. They were nine in number, burly moon-faced men with fringe beards, wearing limp leather trousers, black boots studded with flint cabochons, blouses of faded green jute, headgear of dry seed pods sewed into the shape of a pointed casque; these rattled with each motion of the head. Etzwane thought them the most ruffianly band of his experience and leaned back from the odors which had accompanied them into the room.

The oldest of the Kash gave his headrattles a shake and called out in a roaring voice, "Where is the man who buys slaves at high prices?"

Fabrache responded in a subdued voice, "He is not present at the moment."

Baba the innkeeper asked cautiously, "You have slaves to sell?"

"We do indeed, consisting of those persons now present, save only the innkeeper. Please consider youselves our captives."

Fabrache uttered a cry of indignation. "This is not customary procedure! A man is entitled to drink beer at Shagfe in security!"

"Additionally," Baba declared, "I will tolerate no such conduct. What would happen to my custom? You must retract your threat."

The old Kash grinned and rattled his seed pods. "Very well, in view of the general protest we will put our best interests to the side. Still, we must have a word with Hozman Sore-throat. He has treated the Kash clan with severity; where does he sell so many of our folk?"

"Others have put similar questions, but received no answer," said Baba. "Hozman Sore-throat is not now in Shagfe, and I know nothing of his plans."

The old Blue-worm made a gesture of resignation. "In that case

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we will drink your cellar-brew and make a meal of your cooked food, the odor of which I detect."

"All very well, and how will you pay?"

"We carry with us sacks of safad oil, to settle our score."

Baba said, "Bring in the oil, while I work on the scum off a new cask of cellar-brew."

The evening passed without bloodshed. Ifness and Etzwane sat to the side watching the burly figures luch back and forth across the firelight. Etzwane tried to define the quality by which these roaring celebrants differed from the general population of Shant . . . Intensity, gusto, a focus of every faculty upon the immediate instant, such qualities characterized the folk of Caraz. Trivial acts induced exaggerated reactions. Laughter racked the ribs; rage came fierce and sudden; woe was so intense as to be intolerable. Upon every aspect of existence the clansmen fixed a keen and minute perception, allowing nothing to go unnoticed. Such raptures and transports of emotion left little time for meditation, Etzwane mused. How could a Blue-worm Hulka become a musician when he suffered a congenital lack of patience? Wild dancing around the campfire, melees and murders — this was more the barbarian style...Etzwane and Ifness presently departed the company. They unrolled their blankets under the overhang of the courtyard and lay down to rest. For a period Etzwane lay listening to the muffled revels from the common room. He wanted to ask Ifness his theories regarding the battle between spaceships which had occurred behind Thrie Orgai, but had not stomach for a caustic or ambiguous reply...If the asutra and their hosts had manned the copper disks, what race had built black space globes? For that matter, what race of men with magic weapons had destroyed the Roguskhoi? Why had men, Roguskhoi, copper and black space ships all come to Caraz to do battle? . . . Etzwane put a cautious question to Ifness. "Do any of the Earth-worlds build space vessels in the shape of black globes?"

The question was succinct and precise; Ifness could find no fault with it. He answered in an even voice, "To my knowledge, no." And he added, "I am as puzzled as yourself. It would appear that the asutra have enemies somewhere among the stars. Perhaps human enemies."

"This possibility alone justifies your defiance of Dasconetta," declared Etzwane.

"So it might seem," Ifness replied.

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The Kash Blue-worms chose to sleep in the open beside their pacers; Etzwane and Ifness passed a tranquil night.

In the cool mauve morning Baba brought them mugs of hot cellar-brew with floating dollops of the sour local cheese. "If you fare toward Thrie Orgai, depart early. You will cross the Wild Waste by mid afternoon and can spend the night in a tree along the Vurush."

"Good advice," said Ifness. "Prepare us a breakfast of fried meat and bread and send a boy to arouse Fabrache. Additionally, we will drink herbal tea with our meal, rather than this excellent but overnutritious brew."

"Fabrache is on hand," said the innkeeper. "He wants to leave while the Blue-worms are still torpid. Your breakfast is already prepared. It consists of porridge and locust paste, like everyone else's. As for the tea, I can boil up a broth of pepperweed, if this suits your taste."

Ifness gave a resigned acquiescence. "Bring our pacers around to the front; we depart as soon as possible."

## Chapter 5

The Kash Blue-worms were stirring when Ifness, Etzwane and Fabrache rode forth. One man growled a malediction; another half rose to look after them, but they were in no mood for exertion.

From Shagfe the three rode west across the Wild Waste, an alkali flat stretching out to the limits of vision. The surface was a hard bone-white crust, powdered with a soft acrid dust. Across the waste marched a dozen wind devils, back and forth like dancers of a pavane, out to the horizon and back again, some tall and stately against the brilliant sky, others low to the ground, scurrying without dignity, presently collapsing into purposeless puffs and wisps. For a period Fabrache kept a watch to the rear, but when the huddle of huts disappeared into the dusty lavender distance and no bounding black shapes came in pursuit, he showed a somewhat more confident disposition. Looking sidewise toward Ifness, he spoke in a cautious voice: "Last night we struck no formal contract, but I assume that we travel in confederacy and that neither party will attempt subjugation of the other."

Ifness endorsed this point of view. "We have no particular interest in slavery," said Ifness. "We sold a pair of prime Sorukhs on our way into Shagfe, but to speak frankly, the life of a slaver is too precarious and unrewarding, at least in the Mirkil district."

"The region is overexploited," said Fabrache. "Since Hozman

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Sore-throat became active the population has diminished by a half. At Shagfe Inn we would see many strange faces, many different costumes and styles. Each Hulka clan maintained from three to seven fetish-groups; then there would be Sorukhs from Shillinsk district, Shovel-heads and Alulas from Lake Nior, folk from over the Kuzi Kaza. A small slaver such as myself could earn a modest livelihood and keep a girl or two for his own use. Hozman Sore-throat has put an end to all this. Now we must scour the countryside for sheer sustenance."

"Where does Hozman Sore-throat market his merchandise?"

"Hozman keeps good secrets," said Fabrache with a spiteful sniff. "Someday he will go too far. The world is going sour; it was not thus when I was a boy. Think of it! Spaceships in battle; Red Devils looting and killing; Hozman Sore-throat and his illusory boon of inflationary prices. Then when he destroys us and depopulates Mirkil district, he will move on and work the same outrage elsewhere."

"I look forward to meeting Hozman," said Ifness. "He must have interesting tales to tell."

"To the contrary, he is as terse as a costive chumpa."

"We shall see, we shall see."

As the day progressed, the air quieted and the wind devils disappeared; the three crossed the flat with no discomfort other than the baking heat. By midafternoon the first slopes of the Orgai bulked ahead, and the Wild Waste lay behind. As the three suns dropped behind the mountains, they rode over a hill and saw before them the broad Vurush, flowing from behind the Thrie Orgai and north into the haze. A grove of gnarled yews grew down to the water's edge, and here Fabrache chose to camp for the night, though chumpa traces were evident along the shore.

"They cannot be avoided, no matter where we camp," said Fabrache. "Three men with firebrands can keep them at a distance, if such a need arises."

"Then we must keep watch during the night?"

"Not at all," replied Fabrache. "The pacers will watch, and I will keep the fire ablaze."

He tethered the pacers to a tree and built a fire on the shore. Then, while Ifness and Etzwane collected a stack of resinous yew branches, Fabrache snared a dozen mud crabs which he cracked, cleaned and toasted, and meanwhile cooked meal cakes on hot flat stones. "You are highly efficient," said Ifness. "It is a pleasure to watch you at work."

Fabrache gave his head a dour shake. "I know nothing else but

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this, a skill acquired across a lifetime of hardship. I take no pleasure from your compliment."

"Surely you have other skills?"

"Yes. I am reckoned a good barber. Occasionally in jest I imitate the mating antics of the ahulphs. But these are modest accomplishments; ten years after my death I will be forgotten and one with the soil of Caraz. Still, I consider myself a fortunate man, more so than most. I have often wondered why it was given to me to live the life of Kyril Fabrache."

"These reflections, at one time or another, have occurred to all of us," said Ifness, "but unless we are agreed upon a religion of gradated reincarnation, the question is ingenuous." He rose to his feet and surveyed the landscape. "I assume that the Red Devils never ranged this far west?"

Piqued by Ifness' indifference to his quest for personal truth, Fabrache gave only a short reply. "They never even reached Shagfe." He went off to attend the pacers.

Ifness considered the mass of the Orgai to the north, where the crag Thrie Orgai flared purple in the last rays of the setting suns. "In this case, the spaceship battle would seem isolated from the slaughter of the Roguskhoi," he mused. "The events are of course related; there can be no doubt of this much . . . Tomorrow will be an interesting day." He made one of his rare gesticulations. "If I can produce a spaceship, even a hulk, I am vindicated. Dasconetta will be gray with rage; even now he gnaws his knuckles by the hour . . . We can only hope that these spaceships exist, in fact, that they are something more than mare's-nests."

Etzwane, vaguely irked by the nature of Ifness' aspirations, said, "I can see no value to a wrecked spaceship; they have been known for thousands of years and must be common throughout the system of Earth-worlds."

"True," declared Ifness, still elevated by his visions of triumph, "but these are the product of human knowledge, and many knowledges exist."

"Bah," growled Etzwane. "Iron is iron, glass is glass, and this is the same here or at the end of the universe."

"True once more. The gross elementals are known to all. But there is no finite limit to knowledge. Each set of apparent ultimates is susceptible to examination and must be analyzed in new terms. These succeeding layers of knowledge are numberless. Those familiar to us are each derived from the level above, or below. Conceivably entire disassociated phases of knowledge exist; the field of parapsychology comes to mind.

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The basic law of the cosmos is this: in a situation of infinity, whatever is possible exists in fact. To particularize, the technology which propels an alien spaceship may be different from that of Earth, and such a technology must be a matter of intense interest, if only philosophically." Ifness considered the fire. "I must remark that augmented knowledge is not necessarily a boon and might easily be dangerous."

In that case," Etzwane asked, "why are you so anxious to broadcast this knowledge?"

Ifness chuckled. "First, it is my normal human inclination to do so. Second, the group of which I am a part from which Dasconetta would naturally be expelled is competent to control the most dangerous secrets. Thirdly, I cannot overlook my personal advantage. If I deliver an alien spaceship to the Historical Institute, even a wrecked hulk, I will gain great prestige."

Etzwane turned away to make up his bed, reflecting that of Ifness' three reasons, the last was probably the most cogent.

The night passed without incident. Three times Etzwane awoke. Once he heard from far off the rumbling challenge of a chumpa and from an even greater distance the answering calls of an ahulph tribe, but none came to disturb the camp by the river.

Fabrache awoke before dawn. Blowing up the fire, he prepared a breakfast of porridge boiled with pepper meat and tea.

Not long after dawn the three mounted their pacers and set off to the south along the banks of the Vurush. Gradually they rose into the Orgai.

Shortly before noon Fabrache jerked his pacer to a halt. He cocked his head, as if listening, and looked slowly to all sides.

"What is the matter?" asked Ifness.

Fabrache said nothing. He pointed ahead toward the gap into a stony valley. "Here is where the black globes discovered the disk ships; here is where the battle took place." Rising to stand in his stirrups, he searched the hillsides, and reexamined the sky.

"You have a presentiment," said Etzwane softly.

Fabrache pulled nervously at his beard. "The valley has known a wonderful event; the air still tingles . . . Is there not something more?" Fretfully he swung his gaunt body around in the saddle, rolling his eyes from side to side. "There is pressure upon me."

Etzwane scanned the valley. To right and left, harsh gullies cut into sandstone, the high areas baking white-violet in the sunlight, the deep shadows a black bottle-green. A flicker of motion caught his eye;

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not a hundred feet distant crouched a large ahulph, considering whether or not to hurl a stone. Etzwane said, "Perhaps you feel the gaze of yonder ahulph."

Fabrache swung about, annoyed that Etzwane had seen the creature first. The ahulph, a blue-black buck of a variety unknown to Etzwane, shook its ear fibers uneasily, and started to move away. Fabrache called out in de-da pidgin. The ahulph paused. Fabrache spoke again, and with the swaggering waggishness typical of the higher ahulphs, it bounded down from the jut. Politely it released a waft of "gregariousness"* and sidled forward. Fabrache dismounted from his pacer, and signaled Etzwane and Ifness to do likewise. Tossing a chunk of cold grain cake to the ahulph, he spoke again in de-da. The ahulph made a fervent and elaborate response.

Fabrache turned to Ifness and Etzwane. "The ahulph watched the battle. He has explained to me the sequence of events. Two copper disk ships landed at the end of the valley and remained there almost a week. Persons came out to walk around. They stood on two feet but exuded a nonhuman odor. The ahulph paid no attention to their appearance. They did nothing during their stay and came outside only at dawn and dusk. Three days ago, at noon, four black globes appeared a mile overhead. The disk ships were taken by surprise. The black globes sent down lightning bolts and exploded both disk ships, then departed as abrùptly as they had come. The ahulphs watched the wrecks but felt diffident about approaching. Yesterday a large disk ship dropped from the sky. After hovering an hour, it lifted the hulk which had suffered the least damage and carried it away. Fragments of the second hulk remain."

"Interesting news," murmured Ifness. "Toss the creature another morsel of grain cake. I am anxious to inspect the shattered hulk."

Fabrache scratched his chin, where the first hairs of his beard had their roots. "I must admit to a diffidence not unlike that of the ahulph. The valley holds an uncanny presence which I do not

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**The higher ahulphs control four odors, signifying gregariousness, hostility, and two varieties of excitement unknown to the human race. The innumerable races of lower ahulphs vent only hostility and an attractive scent. The ahulph mentality at times seems to resemble human intelligence, but the similarity is misleading and attempts to deal with ahulphs on a basis of human rationality end in frustration. The ahulph, for instance, cannot understand working for hire, no matter how carefully the matter is explained.*

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care to test."

"Do not apologize," said Ifness. "You are not known as the Lucky Little Survivor for nothing. Will you await us here, in company with the ahulph?"

"This I will do," said Fabrache.

Ifness and Etzwane set off up the valley. They rode a mile, the sandstone rising to either side in crags and juts. The valley floor widened to become a sandy flat, and here they found the hulk of the second ship. The outer skin had been rent and torn in a dozen places; one entire section had disappeared. From the gaps spewed tangled metal and viscous oozes. The top surface had been exploded into tatters which lay scattered across the plain; the ground below showed rings of white, green and yellow powder.

Ifness gave a hiss of vexation. He snatched out his camera and photographed the hulk. "I had expected nothing better than this; still I had hoped. What a trophy, had the ship been susceptible to study! A new cosmology, in effect, to compare with our own! A tragedy, to find it thus!"

Etzwane felt mildly surprised at Ifness' vehemence: such a display was unusual. They moved closer and the wrecked spaceship exerted an eerie fascination, a strange sad majesty. Ifness alighted from his pacer. He picked up a fragment of metal, hefted it, cast it aside. He went up to the hulk, peered into the interior, shook his head in disgust. "Everything of interest is either vaporized, crushed or melted; we have nothing to learn here."

Etzwane spoke. "You notice that a segment of the ship is missing? Look yonder in that gulch: there it has lodged."

Ifness looked where Etzwane had directed. "The ship was attacked first, perhaps, by a burst of explosive force, and then struck again, with energy sufficient to cause the melting." He set off toward the gulch, about fifty yards distant, into which a pie-shaped section of the ship had wedged itself. The outer skin, dented and distorted, but by some miracle untorn, had plastered itself across the narrow opening like a great bronze seal.

The two scrambled up the stones until they could step over to the crumpled metal. Ifness tugged at the edge of a fractured section. Etzwane joined him; by dint of straining, the two bent aside the sheet to provide an opening into the hull. A vile odor issued forth: a stench of decay, different from any Etzwane had known before . . . He became rigid, held up his hand. "Listen."

From below came a faint scraping sound, persisting two or three seconds.

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"Something seems to be alive," Etzwane peered down into the dark. The prospect of entering the broken ship had no appeal for him.

Ifness had no such qualms. From his pouch he brought an object which Etzwane had never seen before: a transparent cube half an inch on a side. Suddenly it emitted a flood of light, which Ifness turned into the dim interior. Four feet below, a broken bench slanted across what seemed to be a storage chamber; a clutter of objects flung from racks lay mounded against the far wall. Ifness stepped down upon the bench and jumped to the floor. Etzwane took a last wistful look around the valley and followed. Ifness stood surveying the heaped articles against the wall. He pointed. "A corpse."

Etzwane moved to where he could see. The dead creature lay on its back, pressed against the wall. "An anthropomorphic biped," said Ifness. "Distinctly not a man, not even manlike, except for two legs, two arms and a head. It even smells different from human carrion."

"Worse," muttered Etzwane. He bent forward, studying the dead thing, which wore no garments save various straps for the support of three pouches, one at either hip, one at the back of the head. The skin, a purplish-black parchment, seemed as hard as old leather. The head displayed a number of parallel bony ridges, originating at the top of a protective ring around the single eye and running back across the scalp. A mouthlike orifice appeared at the base of the neck. Pads of bristle conceivably served as auditory organs.

Ifness saw something which had escaped Etzwane. He reached for a tubular rod, then lunged forward and thrust. In the shadows at the back of the dead creature's neck was a stir of sudden movement, but Ifness was too quick; the rod struck again at the small six-legged creature who had ridden in the pouch at the back of the dead neck.

"Asutra?" asked Etzwane.

Ifness gave his head a jerk of assent. "Asutra and host."

Etzwane inspected the two-legged creature once more. "It is something like the Roguskhoi, in the hard skin, the head shape, the hands and feet."

"I noted the similarity," said Ifness. "It might be a collateral form, or the stock from which the Roguskhoi derived." He spoke tonelessly, his eyes darted this way and that. Etzwane had never seen him so keen. "Quietly now," said Ifness.

On long soft steps he went to the bulkhead and turned his light through an aperture.

They looked along a hall twenty feet long, the bulkheads twisted

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and distorted. Into the far end seeped a wan daylight, filtering through overhead fractures.

Ifness strode quietly down the hall into the terminating room, holding the light cube in one hand, an energy gun in the other.

The room was vacant. Etzwane could not imagine its function or purpose. A bench flanked three walls, with cabinets above containing objects of glass and metal to which Etzwane could put no name. The outside skin and one wall pressed onto the fractured rock, which comprised the fourth wall. Ifness glared in all directions like a gaunt gray hawk. He cocked his head to listen; Etzwane did the same. The air was thick and quiet. Etzwane asked in a low voice, "What is this room?"

Ifness gave his head a curt shake. "They contrive things differently on Earth-world ships . . . I can understand nothing of this."

"Look there." Etzwane pointed. "More asutra." A glass tray at the end of the bench contained a murky fluid in which floated three dozen dark ellipsoids, like so many enormous black olives. Below, indistinct in the matrix, hung still arms.

Ifness went to examine the tank. A tube entered one of the sides; from this tube filaments led up to the asutra. "They seem cataleptic," said Ifness. "Perhaps they take energy, or information, or entertainment." He stood thinking a moment, then spoke. "We can do no more. The matter is now too large for our sole discretion, and in fact is overwhelming." He paused to look around the chamber. "There is material here to occupy ten thousand analysts, to astound the Institute. We will return at once to Shillinsk. From the boat I can signal Dasconetta and through him order out a salvage ship."

"Something aboard is yet alive," said Etzwane. "We cannot leave it to die." As if to reinforce his remark a scraping sound issued from behind the crumpled wall opposite the hall.

"A ticklish business," muttered Ifness. "What if twenty Roguskhoi burst out upon us? . . . On the other hand, something might be learned from a host not under asutra control. Well, then, let us look. But careful and easy! We must be on guard."

He went to the area where the wall met the rock. At the center and bottom contact was not complete, leaving irregular openings the diameter of a man's head, through which air could pass. Etzwane peered through the center gap. For a moment he saw nothing; then abruptly a round object the size of a large coin came into view, reflecting a nacreous pink and green shimmer. Etzwane drew back,

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oppressed by a trilling of the nerves. He collected himself and spoke in a low voice. "It is one of the host-things. I looked into its eye."

Ifness made a curt sound. "If it is alive, it is mortal, and there is no need for panic."

Etzwane choked back a retort and, taking up a metal bar, began to attack the rock. Ifness stood back, an enigmatic expression on his face.

The rock, shattered by the impact of the ship, broke away in chunks. Etzwane worked with a furious energy, as if to distract himself. The center gap grew wide. Etzwane paid no heed and drove the bar furiously into the rock . . . Ifness held up his hand. "Sufficient." He stepped forward, flashed his light into the hole, to reveal a dark waiting shape. "Come forth," said Ifness, and gestured.

There was first silence. Then slowly, but without hesitation, the creature pulled itself through the hole. Like the corpse, it stood naked but for a harness and three pouches, one of which held the asutra. Ifness spoke to Etzwane. "Lead the way to the outside. I will direct the creature to follow you."

Etzwane turned away. Ifness stepped forward, touched the creature's arm, pointed.

The creature stalked after Etzwane down the hall, into the chamber which was open to the sky.

Etzwane climbed up on the bench, pushed his head up into the daylight. Never had air seemed so clear and sweet. And in the sky a mile overhead hovered a great disk ship, slowly rotating on its vertical axis, the three suns laying three-colored reflections on the copper-bronze skin. Another mile above hung four smaller ships.

Etzwane stared up in consternation. The large disk ship descended slowly. He called the news back down to Ifness.

"Hurry," said Ifness. "Help the creature up and hold fast to his harness."

Etzwane scrambled out and stood waiting. From below rose the purple-black head, ridges of bone running across the scalp. The head protruded, and the shoulders, with the pouch containing the asutra. On sudden impulse Etzwane seized the pouch and pulled it away from the black body. A nerve cord stretched; the creature uttered a guttural gasp and released its grip on the edge of the hole and would have fallen backward had Etzwane not clamped his arm around the corded neck. With his other hand he drew the dagger from his belt and slashed the nerve; the asutra, squirming and clutching, pulled free. Etzwane threw it to the surface of the ship, heaved the dark creature to the surface. Ifness

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quickly followed. "What is the commotion?"

"I pulled the asutra loose. There it goes yonder. Hold the host; I will kill it."

Ifness, frowning in displeasure, obeyed. The black host-creature lunged after Etzwane; Ifness clung to its harness. Etzwane ran after the scuttling black object. He picked up a stone, held it high, smashed it down upon the black bulb.

Ifness meanwhile had propelled the suddenly listless creature behind a wall of rock, screening the descending spaceship from its sight. Etzwane, leading the pacers, joined them.

Ifness asked in a frosty voice, "Why did you kill the asutra? You have left us nothing but an empty shell, hardly worth the effort of removing."

Etzwane said dryly, "I recognize this. I also notice the descending ship, and I have been told that the asutra communicate telepathically with their fellows. I thought to afford us a better chance of escape."

Ifness grunted. "The telepathic capability of the asutra has never been established." He looked up the gulch. "The way appears to be feasible. We must hurry, however ...It is possible that Fabrache may think better of waiting overlong."

## Chapter 6

The gulch, narrow, tortuous and strewn with boulders, afforded no scope for riding. Etzwane scrambled ahead, leading the pacers. Behind came the dark creature, its unearthly tendons twitching and pulling in unfamiliar sequences. At the rear strolled Ifness, cool and detached.

Once behind the ridge they veered to the south and so returned to where they had left Fabrache. They found him lolling at his ease against a rock overlooking the valley, where now no spaceships could be seen, wrecked or otherwise. Fabrache leapt to his feet with an ejaculation of shock, for they had come quietly upon him from the side. Ifness held up his hand, admonishing Fabrache to placidity and composure. "As you see," said Ifness, "we have succored a survivor of the battle. Have you seen its like before?"

"Never!" declared Fabrache. "I am not please to see it now. Where will you sell it? Who would care to buy such a thing?"

Ifness gave one of his rare chuckles. "It commands value as a collector's item, so to speak. I have no doubt as to our eventual profit. But what occured yonder in the valley?"

Fabrache stared in wonder.

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"What? Did you not witness the happening at first hand?"

"We took refuge behind the hill," Ifness explained. "Had we remained to watch, we ourselves might have been observed, with no telling as to the consequences."

"Of course, of course; this is clear enough. Well, the rest of the affair surpasses my comprehension. A great ship descended and seized upon the wreck and took it up as if it were a biscuit."

"Did they hoist one section?" Ifness demanded. "Or two?"

"Two. The ship swooped a second time and I thought alas! what a sad end for my slaving companions! Then, as I sat here reflecting upon the remarkable life which it has been my good fortune to live, you crept up and found me musing. Aha!" Fabrache shook his head in mournful self-reproach. "Had you been Hozman Sore-throat, my time as a free man would now be done. What now is our program?"

"We will proceed back to Shagfe, with all speed. First, pour out a cup of water. This creature was pent for several days."

Fabrache poured with a rueful smirk, as if reflecting upon the odd quirks of fate to which he was continually subjected. The creature without hesitation turned the contents of the cup into its throat, and did the same for three more cupfuls. Ifness then proffered a cake of jellied meat, which the creature cautiously refused, then dried fruit, which it dropped into its throat. Ifness offered him pounded seeds from which Fabrache made his bread, salt, and lump fat, all of which the creature rejected.

The supplies were redistributed, and the dark creature was mounted on the pack animal, which jerked and shuddered at the alien scent, and walked with stiff legs and rounded nostrils.

The four set off down the Vurush Valley, along the route they had come, and the miles fell back into the afternoon. The alien rode stolidly, showing no interest in the landscape, hardly moving in the saddle. Etzwane asked Ifness, "Do you think it is in a state of shock, or grief or terror? Or is it only semi-intelligent?"

"As yet, we have no basis for assessment. In due course I would hope to learn a great deal."

"Perhaps it could act as interpreter between men and asutra," said Etzwane.

Ifness frowned, a signal that the idea had not yet occurred to him. "This is of course a possibility." He looked toward Fabrache, who had drawn up his pacer. "What is the matter?"

Fabrache pointed to the east, where the slopes of the Orgai eased

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down upon the plain. "A party of riders — six or eight."

Ifness raised up in his saddle, gazed across the distance. "They are riding in our direction, at a good rate of speed."

"We had best do likewise," said Fabrache. "In this land one cannot take the friendship of strangers for granted." He jerked his pacer into a full lope, and the others followed suit, Etzwane applying the quirt to the pacer ridden by the alien.

Down the valley they coursed, Ifness frowning in distaste. The alien rode stiffly erect, clutching the back-curving horns of his beast. Etzwane judged that for the first two miles they gained ground, then for another two miles held their own; then the pursuing band seemed to gain. Fabrache, with long frame crouched grotesquely low and beard flapping over his shoulder, urged his pacer to its utmost efforts. He yelled over his shoulder, "It is Hozman Sore-throat and his slaving band! Ride for freedom! Ride for your life!"

The pacers were tiring. Time after time they stumbled into a lurching jog, which aroused Fabrache to frantic measures. The pursuing pacers had also become winded, and they too slackened speed. The suns were low in the west, lying three trails upon the surface of the Vurush. Fabrache appraised the distance to the pursuing band and measured it against the height of the suns. He gave a call of despair. "We will be slaves before dark, and then we will learn Hozman's secret."

Ifness pointed ahead. "There, on the shore, a camp of wagons."

Fabrache peered and gave a croak of hope. "We shall arrive in time and claim protection . . . Unless they are cannibals, we are in luck."

A few moments later he called back, "They are the Alula; I now recognize their wains. They are a hospitable folk and we are safe."

On a level area near the river fifty wains with crooked eight-foot wheels had been drawn up to form a hollow square, the wheels and dropped side boards creating a staunch fence. A single opening faced the river. The slavers, trailing by three hundred yards, their pacers coughing and stumbling, gave up the chase and swerved aside toward the river.

Fabrache led the way around the wall of wains and halted before the opening. Four men jumped forward in a crouching splay-legged posture of threat. They wore jerkins of black chumpa-hide strips, helmets of black leather, and carried crossbows three feet wide. "If you be riders with the group yonder, go your way. We want no business with you."

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Fabrache leapt from his pacer and stepped forward. "Put aside your weapons! We are travelers of the Orgai and fugitives from Hozman Sore-throat! We request protection for the night."

"All very well, but what of that one-eyed demoniac creature? We have heard tales; it is a Red Devil!"

"Nothing of the sort! The Red Devils are all dead, killed in a recent battle. This is the sole survivor of a wrecked spaceship."

"In that case, kill it as well. Why should we nurture off-world enemies?"

Ifness spoke in a measured and aristocratic voice: "The matter is more complicated than this. I intend to learn the language of this creature, if it is able to talk. This will help us defeat our enemies."

"It is a matter for Karazan. Stand in your tracks; we are a suspicious people."

A moment later an enormous man strode forward, taller by a head than Fabrache. His face was no less impressive than his bulk; keen eyes glittered under a broad brow; a short beard clothed his cheeks and chin. He required a single second to appraise the situation, then turned a glance of contemptuous deregation toward the guards. He said, "What is the difficulty? When have Alula feared three men and a monster? Let them in." He scowled down at the riverbank where Hozman Sore-throat and his band rested their pacers, then sauntered back the way he had come. The warriors put aside their crossbows and stood back. "Enter as you will. Take your pacers to the pen. Bed yourselves where you like."

"You have our gratitude," Fabrache declared. "Mind, that is Hozman Sore-throat, the expert slaver, yonder; let no one stray outside the camp, or he will never be seen again."

Etzwane was intrigued by the camp and by certain elements of barbaric splendor which in the popular imagination of Shant characterized all the tribes of Caraz. The green, pink and magenta tents had been embroidered in marvelous starbursts and radiants. The carved tent stakes stood eight feet tall, displaying fetishes of four sorts: winged scorpions, wisk-weasels, Lake Nior kingfish, Lake Nior pelicans. The men of the camp wore trousers of pounded ahulph leather, glossy black boots, embroidered vests over loose white blouses. Married women wound their heads with purple and green scarfs; their full gowns were of various colors; girls, however, swaggered about in breeches and boots like the men. Before each tent a cauldron bubbled over a fire, and the odors of spices and stewing meat

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permeated the camp. In front of the ceremonial wain sat the elders, passing a leathern flask of aquavita back and forth. Nearby, four other men, each wearing a string of golden beads, made desultory music upon stringed instruments.

No one gave the newcomers more than cursory attention; they went to the area indicated to them, unloaded their pacers and laid out their beds. The alien watched without apparent interest. Fabrache dared not go to the river for clams or crayfish and cooked an austere meal of porridge and dried meat; the alien drank water and thrust a quantity of porridge into its maw without enthusiasm. Children of the camp began to gather and watched in wide-eyed wonder. They were joined by others, progressively older, and presently one put a timid question: "Is the creature tame?"

"It seems to be," said Etzwane. "It came to Durdane in a spaceship, so it is certainly civilized."

"Is it your slave?" asked another.

"Not exactly. We rescued it from a wrecked spaceship, and now we want to learn how to talk to it."

"Can it do wonderful magic?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Does it dance?" asked one of the girls. "Bring it to where the music is played, and we will watch its fanciful acts."

"It neither dances nor plays music," said Etzwane.

"What a tiresome beast."

A woman came to scold the children and sent them about their business, and the group was left in peace.

Fabrache spoke to Ifness. "How do you intend to keep the creature for the night? Must we stand a guard?"

"I think not," said Ifness. "It might then consider itself a prisoner and seek to escape. It knows that we are its source of food and security, and I believe that it will stay with us of its own volition. Still, we will maintain an unobtrusive watch." Ifness now addressed himself to the creature and attempted the rudiments of communication: placing down first one pebble, two, then three, while saying "One...Two...Three..." and signaling the alien to do likewise, but to no avail. Ifness next directed the creature's attention to the sky, where the stars blazed bright and clear. Ifness pointed here and there in a questioning fashion and even took the creature's hard finger and pointed it about the sky. "It is either extremely intelligent or extremely stupid," grumbled Ifness. "Still, were the asutra in command, we would derive no more information. There is no cause for complaint."

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From the central fire came the sound of energetic music, and Etzwane went to watch the dancing. The youths and maidens, forming into lines, swayed, kicked, capered, swung each other in circles, all in the most exuberant fashion. The music seemed uncomplicated to Etzwane, even somewhat naive, but as vigorous and forthright as the dancing. Some of the girls were extremely handsome, he thought, and showed little diffidence...He toyed with the idea of playing music and went so far as to examine a spare instrument of bizarre and exaggerated construction. He sounded the strings, but the frets were oddly spaced, and the tuning was to a strange mode. Etzwane doubted his ability to use the instrument. He struck a few chords, using his usual fingering. The results were strange but not displeasing. A girl stood over him, smiling. "Do you play music?"

"Yes, but this instrument is unfamiliar to me."

"What is your race and fetish?"

"I am a man of Shant; I was born a Chilite in Canton Bastern."

The girl shook her head in bewilderment. "They must be far lands; I have never heard of them. Are you a slave trader?"

"No. My friend and I came to look at the strange spaceships."

"Such things are interesting."

The girl was pretty, vivacious and beautifully formed, and Etzwane thought that she seemed pleasantly disposed. He suddenly felt an inclination to play music, and bent his head over the instrument, to learn its system of harmonics...He retuned the strings and found that by thinking in the unusual Kudarian mode the instrument fell under his control. He cautiously played a few phrases and tried to follow the music, with a degree of success.

"Come," said the girl. She took him to the other musicians and brought him the leather flask from which all had been drinking. Etzwane allowed himself a cautious swallow; the sting of the spirit caused him to laugh and blow out his breath. "Laugh again!" the girl commanded. "Musicians should never be somer, even when their mood is tragic; their eyes should show colored lights."

One of the musicians glowered first at the girl, then at Etzwane, who decided to be discreet. He played tentative chords and with increasing confidence joined the music. The theme was simple and played insistently again and again, but each time with a small alteration: the prolongation of a beat, a twanged note, a trifle of emphasis here or there. The musicians seemed to vie in producing the most subtle changes

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in the succession; meanwhile the music became even more intense and compelling, and the dancers swirled, jerked arms, kicked and stomped in the firelight . . . Etzwane began to wonder when the music would stop, and how. The others would know the signal; they would try to catch him napping so that when he worked on alone he would seem ridiculous: an ancient prank to play on the stranger. All would know when the tune should end; there would be a side-glance, a raised elbow, a hiss, a shift of position . . . The signal came; Etzwane felt its presence. As he had expected, the music stopped short; he instantly broke into a variation in a different mode, a pulsing statement even more compelling than the first theme, and presently the musicians, some grinning, some with wry winces, again joined the music . . . Etzwane laughed, and bent over the instrument, which now had become familiar, and began to produce runs and trills . . . The music at last halted. The girl came to sit beside Etzwane, and proffered the flask. Etzwane drank and, putting down the flask, asked, "What is your name?"

"I am Rune the Willow Wind, of the Pelican fetish. Who are you?"

"My name is Gastel Etzwane. In Shant we do not reckon our clans or fetishes, only our canton."

"In different lands are different customs," agreed the girl. "Sometimes it is puzzling. Over the Orgai and along the Botgarsk River live the Shada, who cut off a girl's ears if she so much as speaks to a man. Is this the custom of Shant?'

"Not at all," said Etzwane. "Among the Alula are you allowed to speak to strangers?"

"Yes, indeed, we obey our own inclinations in such matters, and why should we not?" She tilted her head and gave Etzwane a candid inspection. "You are of a race thinner and keener than ours. You have what we call the *aersk** look."

Etzwane was not displeased by the flattery. The girl apparently was somewhat wayward and wanted to enlarge her horizons by flirting with a strange young man. Etzwane, though of a wary disposition, was not unwilling to oblige her. He asked, "The musician yonder: he is not your betrothed?"

"Galgar the Wisk-weasel? Do I seem the sort who would consort with a man like Galgar?"

"Of course not. I notice also that he keeps poor time in his music, which indicates a deficient personality."

"You are amazingly perceptive," said Rune the Willow Wind.

**Aersk: untranslatable. Loosely: a fearless nobleman of the high crags, whose first needs are space, sunlight and storms.*

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She moved closer; Etzwane smelled the tree balsam she used as a scent. She spoke in a soft voice, "Do you like my cap?"

"Yes, of course," said Etzwane, puzzled by the lack of sequence in the girl's remarks. "Although it seems about to fall off your head."

Ifness had come to sit by the fire. He now raised an admonitory finger, and Etzwane went to learn his requirements. "A word of caution," said Ifness.

"Unnecessary. I am more than cautious; I look in all directions at once."

"Just so, just so. Remember that in the Alul camp we are subject to their laws. Fabrache tells me that the Alul women can assert a marital connection with some simplicity. Do you notice how certain of the maidens wear their caps askew? If a man removes the cap or so much as sets it straight, he is held to have disarranged her intimate apparel, and if she raises an outcry, the two must marry."

Etzwane looked through the dying firelight toward Rune the Willow Wand. "The caps are precariously placed...An interesting custom." He slowly went to rejoin the girl. She asked, "What has that peculiar person been telling you?"

Etzwane cast about for a reply. "He noticed my interest in you; he warned me not to offend you by touching your garments."

Rune the Willow Wand smiled and cast a contemptuous glance toward Ifness. "What an old prig! But he need not fear! My best three friends have arranged to meet their lovers near the river, and I agreed to walk with them, although I have no lover and will be wistful and lonely."

"I advise you to walk some other night," said Etzwane. "Hozman Sore-throat prowls the vicinity; he is the arch-slaver of Caraz."

"Pff. Do you refer to the rogues who chased you hither? They rode north; they are gone. They would never dare molest the Alula."

Etzwane gave his head a skeptical shake. "If you are lonely, come talk to me yonder behind the wain where I have spread my blankets."

Rune the Willow Wand stood back, eyebrows arched in disdain. "I am not interested in such a graceless proceeding. To think that I considered you *aersk,*" She twitched her cap securely down on her head and sauntered away. Etzwane gave a rueful shrug and presently went to his blankets. For a period he watched the alien, who sat motionless in the shadows, showing only its outline and the soft glow of its single eye.

Etzwane felt somewhat reluctant to sleep with the alien so

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near at hand; after all they knew nothing of its proclivities. But presently he drowsed . . . After a time he awoke uneasily, but the creature sat immobile, and Etzwane went back to sleep once more.

An hour before dawn a bellow of enormous rage jerked Etzwane from his slumber. He jumped to his feet to see a number of Alul warriors rushing forth from their wains. They spoke back and forth, than all dashed for their pacers, and presently Etzwane heard the thud of retreating hooves.

Fabrache had gone forth for information; he returned, dolefully wagging his head. "It's just as I warned them, and they would not believe. Last night four maidens went to walk down by the river and never returned. Hozman Sore-throat is to blame. The Alula ride in vain, for once Hozman makes his pluck his victims are never seen again."

The riders returned disconsolate; they had cast about for tracks without success, and they had no ahulphs to follow the slave takers' trail. The leader of the search party was the massive Karazan. He flung himself from the saddle and marched across the compound to confront Ifness. "Tell me where the slave taker may be found, that we may either win back our flesh and blood or pull him apart with our bare hands."

Ifness indicated Fabrache. "My friend here, also a slaver, can provide information far more detailed and intimate than I."

Fabrache gave his beard a judicious tug. "I know nothing of Hozman Sore-throat, neither his race, nor his clan, nor his fetish. I can assure you of two facts only. First, he often visits Shagfe, to buy at the collecting station; and secondly, whomever Hozman takes is gone forever."

"That remains to be seen," said Karazan. "Where is Shagfe?"

"A day's journey to the east."

"We ride at once for Shagfe! Bring forth the pacers!"

"Our own destination is Shagfe," said Ifness. "We will ride in your company."

"Make haste," said the Alula. "Our mission will not be conducive to leisure or reverie."

Eighteen pacers loped across the Wild Waste, the riders slouched low, caps flapping over their shoulders. Shagfe appeared in the distance: a gray and black smudge upon the violet-gray background of hills and haze.

At sunset the riders pounded into Shagfe, to halt in a swirl of dust before the inn.

Baba looked through the door hole, pale eyebrows in astounded arcs at the sight of the alien

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creature. The Alula descended and entered, with Ifness, Fabrache, Etzwane and the silent black creature coming behind.

At the benches hunched the Kash Blue-worms, drunk and surly. At the sight of the tribal enemies, the Alula, they drew themselves up and muttered together. Fabrache spoke to Baba. "My friends here have a bit of business with Hozman Sore-throat. Has he been seen today?"

Baba said peevishly, "I made a rule against discussing the affairs of my customers. I am not —"

Karazan strode forward, to loom above Baba. "Answer the question."

"I have not seen Hozman since early this morning," growled Baba.

"Aha, what's this? Early morning?"

"True! With these two hands I served his gruel while the suns clambered over the horizon."

"How can this be?" Karazan demanded in a menacing voice. "He was seen at sundown where the Vurush comes down from the Orgai. At midnight he made his presence felt. How could he have eaten breakfast here at dawn?"

The innkeeper reflected. "It might be possible, on a good Angos pacer."

"Well, then, what was his pacer this morning?"

"An ordinary Jerzy."

"Perhaps he changed his mount," Ifness suggested.

The Alula snorted. He turned back to Fabrache. "You can certify that Hozman chased you down the Orgai mountains?"

"I am sure. Have I not seen Hozman Sore-throat many a time, riding with his band and alone?"

A voice spoke to their backs. "I hear my name mentioned, I trust in a kindly reference."

All swung about. Hozman Sore-throat stood in the door hole. He came forward, a pale, stern-faced man of ordinary structure. A black cloak concealed his garments, except for the maroon scarf which muffled his neck.

The Alula said, "Last night on the river Vurush you took four of our people. We want them restored to us. The Alula are not for the slave pens; this we will make clear to every slave taker of Caraz."

Hozman Sore-throat laughed, putting aside the threat with the ease of long practice. "Are you not overhasty? You accost me without basis."

Karazan took a slow step forward. "Hozman, your time is upon you."

The landlord bustled close. "Not in the inn! This is the first law of Shagfe!"

The Alula thrust him aside with a sweep of his massive arm. "Where are our people?"

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"Come now," said Hozman briskly. "I can't be blamed for every disappearance in the Mirkil district. At Vurush River under the Orgai? Last night? A far distance for a man who breakfasted at Shagfe."

"A not impossible distance."

Hozman smilingly shook his head. "If I owned pacers that staunch and swift, would I deal in slaves? I would breed pacers and make my fortune. As for your people, the Orgai is chumpa country; here may be the tragic truth."

Karazan, pale with rage and frustration, stood speechless, unable to find a crevice in Hozman's defense. Hozman glimpsed the black creature in the shadow of the doorway. He jerked forward, intent and startled. "What does the Ka do here? Is it now your ally?"

Ifness said evenly, "I captured it under Thrie Orgai, near where you met us yesterday afternoon."

Hozman turned away from the creature he had called a "Ka"; nevertheless, his eyes strayed back toward where it stood. He spoke in easy jocular tones. "Another voice, another accusation! If words were blades, poor Hozman would writhe on the ground in a hundred pieces."

"As he will, in any event," said Karazan menacingly, "unless he returns the four Alul girls he stole."

Hozman calculated, looking back and forth between Ifness and the Ka. He turned to Karazan. "Certain of the chumpas are my agents," he said in a voice like cream. "Perhaps they hold your Alul girls. If such is the case, will you trade four for two?"

"How do you mean, 'four for two'?" growled Karazan.

"For your four, I'll take this white-haired man and the Ka."

"I veto the proposal," said Ifness promptly. "You must put forward a better offer."

"Well, the Ka alone then. Think! A savage alien for four handsome girls."

"A remarkable offer!" declared Ifness. "Why do you want the creature?"

"I can always find customers for such a curiosity." Hozman moved politely aside to allow newcomers into the common room: two Kash Blue-worms, drunk and ugly, the hair matted on their foreheads. The foremost jostled Hozman. "Stand back, reptile. You have brought us all to poverty and degradation; must you now block my path as well?"

Hozman moved away, his lips curling in a smile of contempt. The Kash Blue-worm stopped short and thrust forward his face. "Do you dare to mock me? Am I ludicrous?"

Baba sprang forward. "No

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combat in here, never in the common room!"

The Kash swung his arm in a back-handed blow, knocking Hozman to the floor, at which Baba brought forth a cudgel and with amazing dexterity drove the Kash cursing and lumbering from the inn. Ifness solicitously reached to help Hozman to his feet. He glanced at Etzwane. "Your knife, to cut off a growth."

Etzwane jumped forward. Ifness held aside Hozman's maroon scarf; Etzwane slashed the straps of the little harness, while Hozman lay thrashing and kicking. The innkeeper gaped in amazement, unable to wield his cudgel. With his nose wrinkled in distaste Ifness lifted the asutra, a flattened creature marked with faint brown and maroon stripes. Etzwane slashed the nerve, and Hozman emitted the most appalling scream yet heard in the inn at Shagfe.

A hard strong shape struck between Ifness and Etzwane: the Ka. Etzwane raised his knife, ready to stab, but the Ka was already gone with the asutra and out into the yard. Ifness ran in pursuit, with Etzwane close behind. They came upon a macabre scene, indistinct in swirls of boiling dust. The Ka, talons protruding from its feet, stamped upon the asutra and tore it to shreds.

Ifness, putting away his energy gun, stood grimly watching. Etzwane said in astonishment, "It hates the asutra more than we do."

"A curious exhibition," Ifness agreed.

From within the inn came a new outcry and the thud of blows. Clutching his head, Hozman ran frantically out into the yard, with the Alula in pursuit. Ifness, moving with unusual haste, intervened and waved off the Alula. "Are you totally without foresight? If you kill this man, we will learn nothing."

"What is there to learn?" roared Karazan. "He has sold our daughters into slavery; he says we will never see them again."

"Why not learn the details?" Ifness turned to where Etzwane prevented Hozman from flight. "You have much to tell us."

"What can I tell you?" said Hozman. "Why should I trouble myself? They will tear me apart like the cannibals they are."

"I am nevertheless curious. You may tell your story."

"It is a dream," mumbled Hozman. "I rode through the air like a gray ghost; I spoke with monsters; I am a creature alive and dead."

"First of all," said Ifness, "Where are the people you stole last night?"

Hozman threw his arm up in an unrestrained gesture which suggested imprecision in his thinking

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processes. "Beyond the sky! They are gone forever. No one returns after the car drops down."

"Ah, I see. They have been taken into an aircraft."

"Better to say that they are gone from the world Durdane."

"And when does the car drop down?"

Hozman looked furtively aside, with his mouth pinched into a crafty knot. Ifness spoke sharply. "No temporizing! The Alula are waiting to torture you, and we must not inconvenience them."

Hozman gave a hoarse laugh. "What do I care for torture? I know I must die by pain; so I was told by my witch-uncle. Kill me any way you like; I have no preference."

"How long have you carried the asutra?"

"It has been so long I have forgotten my old life . . . When? Ten years ago, twenty years. They looked into my tent, two men in black garments; they were no men of Caraz, nor men of Durdane. I rose to meet them in fear, and they put the mentor upon me." Hozman felt his neck with trembling fingers. He looked sidelong toward the Alula, who stood attentive, hands at the hilts of their scimitars.

"Where are the four you stole from us?" asked Karazan.

"They are gone to a far world. You are curious as to what is to be their lot? I cannot say. The mentor told me nothing."

Ifness made a sign to Karazan and spoke in an easy voice. "The mentor was able to communicate with you?"

Hozman's eyes became unfocused, words began to gush from his mouth. "It is a condition impossible to describe. When I first discovered the creature I went crazy with revulsion but only for a moment! It performed what I call a pleasure-trick, and I became flooded with joy. The dreary Balch swamp seemed to swim with delightful odors, and I was a man transformed. There was at that moment nothing which I could not have accomplished!" Hozman threw his arms to the sky. "The mood lasted several minutes, and then the men in black returned and made me aware of my duties. I obeyed, for I quickly learned the penalty of disobedience; the mentor could bless or punish, with joy or pain. It knew the language of men but could not speak except in a hiss and a whistle, which I never learned. But I could talk aloud and ask if such a course fulfilled its wishes. The mentor became my soul, closer to me than hands and feet, for its nerve led to my nerves. It was alert to my welfare and never forced me to work in rain or cold, and I have never hungered, for my work was rewarded with ingots of gold and copper."

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"And what were your duties?" asked Ifness.

Hozman's flow of words was again stimulated, as if they had been long pent inside of him, building a pressure to be released. "They were simple. I bought prime slaves, as many as could be had. I worked as a slave taker, and I have scoured the face of Caraz, from the Azur River in the east to the vast Dulgov in the west and as far south as Mount Thruska. Thousands of slaves have I sent into space!"

"Exactly how did you so send them?"

"At night, when no one was near and the mentor could warn me of danger, I called down the little car and loaded aboard my slaves, which first I had drugged into a happy stupor: Sometimes only one or two, again as many as a dozen or even more. If I chose, the car would take me where I wished to go, quickly through the night, as from the Orgai to Shagfe Village."

"And where did the car take the slaves?"

Hozman pointed into the sky. "Above hangs a depot hull, where the slaves lay quiet. When the hull is full, it flies away to the mentor's world, which lies somewhere in the coils of Histhorbo the Snake. So much I learned, to my idle amusement one starry night when I asked my mentor many questions and it would give me a yes or no. Why did it need so many slaves? Because its previous creatures were inadequate and insubordinate, and because it feared a terrible enemy, somewhere off among the stars." Hozman fell silent. The Alula had drawn close to surround him; they now regarded him less with hate than with awe for the weird travail he had undergone.

Ifness asked in his most casual voice, "And how do you call down the little car?"

Hozman licked his lips and looked off over the plain. Ifness said gently, "Never again will you carry the asutra which brought such bliss to your brain. You are now one with the rest of us, and we consider the asutra our enemies."

Hozman said sullenly, "In my pouch I carry a box with a little button within. When I require the car, I go out into the dark night and push the button and hold it so until the car domes down."

"Who drives the car?"

"The device works by a mysterious will of its own."

"Give me the box with the button."

Hozman slowly drew forth the box which Ifness took into his own possession. Etzwane, at a glance and a nod from Ifness, searched Hozman's pouch and person but found only three small ingots of copper and a magnificent steel dagger with a handle of carved

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white glass.

Hozman watched with a quizzical expression. "Now what will you do with me?"

Ifness looked toward Karazan, who shook his head. "This is not a man upon whom we can take vengeance. He is a puppet, a toy on a string."

"You have made a just decision," said Ifness. "In this slave-taking land his offense is simple overzealousness."

"Still, what next?" demanded Karazan. "We have not reclaimed our daughters. This man must call down the car, which we will seize and hold against their release."

"There is no one aboard the car with whom you can bargain," said Hozman. Suddenly he added, "You might go aloft in the car and expostulate in person."

Karazan uttered a soft sound and looked up into the purple sky of the evening? a colossus in white blouse and black breeches. Etzwane also looked up and thought of Rune the Willow Wand among the crawling asutra...

Ifness asked Hozman, "Have you ever gone aloft to the depot ship?"

"Not I," said Hozman. "I had great fear of such an event. On occasion a gray dwarf creature and its mentor came down to the planet. Often have I stood hours through the night while the two mentors hissed one to the other. Then I knew that the depot had reached capacity and that no more slaves were needed for a period."

"When last did the mentor come down from the depot?"

"A time ago, I cannot recall exactly. I have been allowed small time for reflections."

Ifness became pensive. Karazan thrust his bulk forward. "This shall be our course of action: we shall call down the car and ourselves go aloft, to destroy our enemies and liberate our people. We need only wait until night."

"The tactic leaps to mind," said Ifness. "If successful it might yield valuable benefits not the least being the ship itself. But difficulties present themselves, notably the return descent. You might find yourself in command of the depot ship, but nonetheless marooned. Such a venture is precarious. I advise against it."

Karazan made a disconsolate sound and again searched the sky, as if to discover a feasible route to the depot ship. Hozman, seeing an opportunity to slip away unobserved, did so. He walked around the inn to his pacer, to find a Blue-worm rifling the saddle bags. Hozman gave an inarticulate babble of fury and leapt upon the burly back. A second Blue-worm, at the other side of the pacer, drove his fist into Hozman's face, to send

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Hozman staggering back against the wall of the inn. The Blue-worms continued their ignoble work. The Alula looked on with disgust, half of a mind to intervene, but Karazan called them away. "Let the jackals do as they will; it is none of our affair."

"You call us jackals?" demanded one of the Kash. "That is an insulting epithet!"

"Only for a creature who is not a jackal," said Karazan in a bored voice. "You need not take offense."

The Kash, considerably outnumbered, had no real stomach for a fight and turned back to the saddle bags. Karazan turned away and shook his fist at the sky.

Etzwane, restless and troubled, spoke to Ifness. "Suppose for a fact that we did capture the ship. Could you not bring it down to the ground?"

"Almost certainly I could not. With definite certainty I do not intend to try."

Etzwane stared at Ifness with cold hostility. "We must do something. A hundred, perhaps two hundred people hang up there, waiting for the asutra to take them away to some strange place, and we are the only ones who can help them."

Ifness laughed. "You exaggerate my capabilities, at least. I suspect that you have been captivated by certain flirtatious glances and that now you wish to perform a gallant feat, no matter what the difficulties."

Etzwane contained his first rush of words, especially since the remarks were apt enough to cause him discomfort. . .Why should he suddenly expect altruism from Ifness, after all? From the moment of their first meeting Ifness had consistently refused to divert himself from his own large concerns. Not for the first time, Etzwane regarded Ifness with cold dislike. Their relationship, never close, had shifted into a new and distant phase. But he spoke in an even voice. "At Shillinsk could you not call Dasconetta and request an Earth ship for a business of great urgency?"

"I could do this," said Ifness. "Furthermore, Dasconetta might well put through the order, and thereby sequester to himself an achievement which rightfully should be credited elsewhere."

"How long before such a ship could arrive in Shagfe?"

"As to this, I could make no estimate."

"Within a day: Three days? Two weeks? A month?"

"A number of factors are involved. Under favorable conditions a ship might arrive in two weeks."

Karazan, comprehending nothing of the matter save the time-

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span involved, declared, "By that time the depot may be gone, and the people as well, to terrible events on some far cold world."

"It is a tragic situation," agreed Ifness, "But I can make no recommendations."

"What of this?" asked Etzwane. "You ride at best speed to Shillinsk and there demand assistance from the Dasconetta. I will call down the transfer car and go up with the Alula to capture the depot ship. If possible, we will return to Durdane; if not, we will await your coming."

Ifness reflected a moment before replying. "The scheme has a certain mad logic and conceivably might come to a successful issue. I know a tactic to obviate Dasconetta's interference, which goes to answer one of my previous objections . . .The uncertainties, however, are numerous; you are dealing with an unknown situation."

"I understand this," said Etzwane. "But the Alula will go aloft in any event, and here," he patted his pouch with the energy gun within, "is their best hope of success. Knowing this, how could I stand aside?"

Ifness shrugged. "I personally cannot afford these quixotic extravagances; I would long since have been dead. Still, if you bring down to Durdane an alien space ship, or even secure it in orbit until my coming, I shall applaud your altruistic bravado. I emphasize, however, that while I will keep your affairs in mind, I can guarantee nothing, and I strongly recommend that you stay below."

Etzwane gave a bitter chuckle. "I understand very well. Still, human lives are at stake whether we go up or not. You had best leave for Shillinsk at once. Haste is essential."

Ifness frowned. "Tonight? The way is long...Still, Baba's inn offers only small solace. I agree, haste is desirable. Well, then, the Ka and I will ride for Shillinsk with Fabrache to guide us. We leave at once." (*to be concluded next month*)

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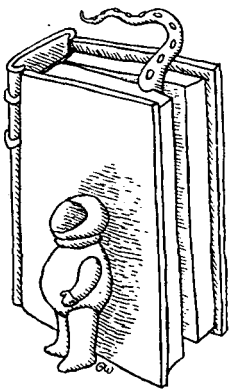
## The Dark Corner

Although "Oliver Onions" sounds as if it might be the lead animated vegetable in a television supermarket ad or a minor comic character in one of Dicken's more involved novels, it is, in fact, the name of the man who was one of the best, if not the best, ghost story writers working in the English language. Anyone who has done any reading at all in the field is bound to have come across his deservedly over-anthologized "The Beckoning Fair One," probably his masterpiece, and more persistent delvers have probably got a *frisson* off of "Rooum" and a bit weepy over "John Gladwin Says . . ." but how many have had the good fortune to be chilled by "The Rope in the Rafters," made timid over museum exhibits by "The Painted Face," and, particularly those who have had the gall to essay fiction, been mentally dislocated by "The Real People?" Not bloody many, would by this reviewer's guess, but now, thanks to Dover Publications, Inc., you can purchase *The Collected Ghost Stories of Oliver Onions* for a laughable four dollars and read all of the above plus sixteen other stories by this excellent man. Any additional pointings-out on my part are purely arbitrary, since everything in this book is well worth your time, but I might mention that "Benlian" is

## GAHAN WILSON

# Books

THE COLLECTED GHOST STORIES OF OLIVER ONIONS, Oliver Onions, Dover, $4.00
SELECTED POEMS, Clark Ashton Smith, Arkham House, $10.00
THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES, Richard Davis., ed., DAW Books, $.95
BEYOND THE CURTAIN OF DARK, Peter Haining, ed., Pinnacle, $1.25
THE HOLLYWOOD NIGHTMARE, Peter Haining, ed., Taplinger, $5.95
THE CLANS OF DARKNESS, Peter Haining, ed., Taplinger, $5.95
GOTHIC TALES OF TERROR, Peter Haining, ed., Taplinger, $11.95



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one of the God damndest seduction stories ever written, and that the author's introduction is essential reading for all wishing to pursue the craft of conjuring ghosts with ink and paper. Mr. Onions did as much as anyone to move phantoms and other haunts from dark, Gothic dungeons to the very room in which you presently sit. There are probably only five or six others who have done as much, and this book is as good a collection of supernatural fiction as can be bought. My only complaint is that its paper covers are covered by this shiny, transparent stuff that crinkles and peels off and side tracks you into spending minutes at a time seeing if you can remove the stuff without tearing the ink off the paper underneath.

There is another super bargain available to you, this one in hard covers from Arkham House, costing ten dollars but containing four hundred and three pages of material in type almost as small as that in *The Outsider*, and that is *Selected Poems* by Clark Ashton Smith. Probably the best way to give you an idea of the treasures within would be to list the subheadings: *The Star-Treader and Other Poems, Additional Early Poems, Ebony and Crystal* (including the fiction version of *The Hashish-Eater*), *Sandalwood, Translations and Paraphrases, Incantations, Experiments in Haiku, Satires and Travesties, The Jasmine Girdle,* and *The Hill of Dionysus*. Poetry was always Smith's deepest love, and this book, so long in coming, is an awesome monument to his art. It contains the bulk of his work, all of the best work, and ranges from his first poems in the early nineteen hundreds to the end. Smith was heavily involved in editing and rewriting the book in the forties, the task was taken up by others, and now, at last, we have it. I wish it had dates and, more audaciously, an index of first lines but this is carping when one considers what it does have.

On a level a little less dizzying than the first two items, but still good, clean fun, we have the kick-off of a series of annual collections edited by Richard Davis and entitled *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, and I think the least anyone interested in the macabre fantastic can do is to give a worthy project such as this encouragement and all good wishes. The quality of the stories seemed to me to be pretty varied, but it's an interesting sampling from divers markets and authors. There are reliable old regulars such as Bloch and Matheson, comers such as Brian Lumley and Ramsey Campbell, and

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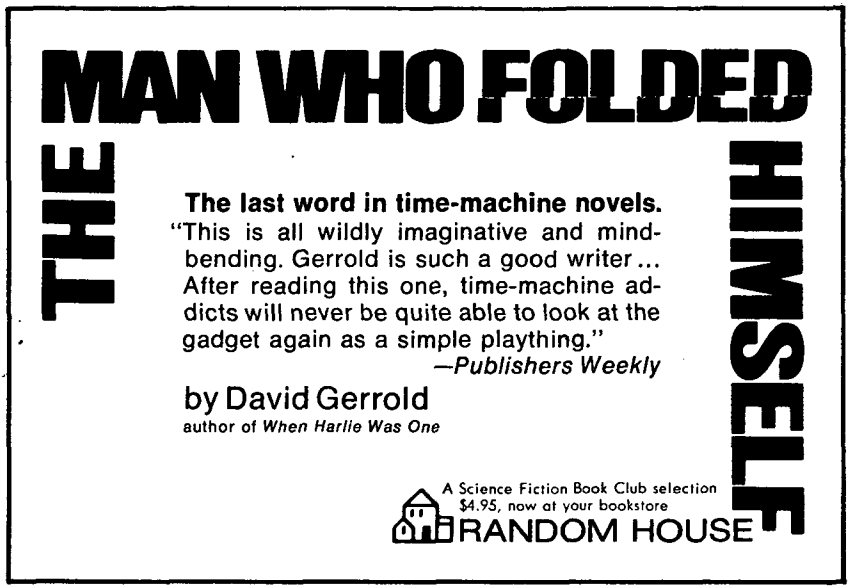
THE MAN WHO FOLDED HIMSELF
The last word in time-machine novels.
"This is all wildly imaginative and mind-bending. Gerrold is such a good writer... After reading this one, time-machine addicts will never be quite able to look at the gadget again as a simple plaything."
—Publishers Weekly
by David Gerrold
author of When Harlie Was One
A Science Fiction Book Club selection
$4.95, now at your bookstore
RANDOM HOUSE


a really nice bit of supernatural sociology by Robert McNear called "Death's Door," which I had read before and which well deserves being called one of the year's best.

Another event those fond of the weird may be grateful for is the arrival in our midst of an anthologist whose production and persistence are well-nigh Derlethian. His name is Peter Haining, and I know nothing of him save that he is obviously a skilled promoter and a researcher of pluck and ingenuity. Though he sometimes uses material which is possibly too familiar, he is always careful to include odd and interesting items which are almost certain to be new to you or which you may have heard of but were never able to track down. *Beyond the Curtain of Dark,* for example, contains a nice period piece by Mary Shelly, "The Mortal Immortal," and a nicely repulsive story by the excellent mystery writer Patricia Highsmith called "The Snail Watcher."

Then in *The Hollywood Nightmare* Mr. Haining puts together all the old favorites concerning ghastly happenings in tinsel city, but he sneaks in a couple of new ones to me and has somehow or other gotten Christopher Lee to write a forward to the thing and snagged

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an essay by dear old Boris Karloff on what it's like to be Boris Karloff. Going on to more ambitious efforts, we have *The Clans of Darkness* which is a collection of spooky stuff concerning the Scotch. It's very cleverly built as the editor starts out with aulde stories and works his way up to present day creepiness, including, *en route,* many excellent tales and a forward by none other than Angus Wilson. Like I say, Mr. Haining is a promoter. Also there is "Wandering Willie's Tale" from *Red-gauntlet* reworked by Sir Walter Scott into an independent short story, "A Night In the Grave," and you can't do that sort of carryings on any better. There is also, most considerately, a glossary at the end to help you out with the more obscure Scot words. The best of the Haining collections I have on hand, though, is *Gothic Tales of Terror* which is nine hundred and twenty eight pages of classic stuff some of it complete stories, some of it extracted from longer works. It covers just about every name in the area from Horace Walpole to William Beckford to Byron to De Quincy to Le Fanu to E. T. A. Hoffman to Eugene Sue (this one the short story upon which the enormous *Wandering Jew* sprouted from) to Hawthorne to Poe, and a goodly scattering of the prolific Anonymous. Some of these are not the authors at their best, but the point of this collection is mostly to unearth items not likely to have crossed your path before. If you enjoy this kind of thing you will have a fine time with the book and, thanks to quite well done introductory essays throughout, learn all sorts of interesting and sometimes nicely gossipy things about the folk who gave us all those bleeding floors, demon lovers and lengths of chain rattling in the night.

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Paul Darcy Boles ("Droodspell," February 1973) returns with a brisk and amusing tale about an ad agency director in search of an actress to work a mean, hard-sell commercial. "Get out there and *buy* it," the script said, "or you'll fall apart and die."

# Meddy

## by PAUL DARCY BOLES

It happened a couple of Neilsen ratings back; I was in my office (that melange of everything) finalizing a lunch date with a friend in another agency (marts and meat and small talk) when Buzzy came rolling in. He is our creative director, and I often wonder why, when they knitted him, they dropped all those stitches. He has wild hair and he talks swiftly, to clients or personnel; when he has an idea, he charges with it even if the idea itself is a piece of from nothing. But he's one of the best creative men, as those things go, on the whole circuit; about twenty-four years old and a weird boy wonder. I've been directing longer than he's been interested in women.

"All right, Stanny boy," he said. "Go over to Lilla Greenspan, she's casting this job. What I want is something commanding in a female shape; we have this account, Barton's Biodegradable Detergent—"

"I've *heard,* I've *heard,*" I said. "It puts the river back where the river was before it got dumped in the river. Great product, son—"

"No, because it's not selling. But they've okayed the new commercial; here're copies of it, fresh off the Xerox box — what I want you to do," he went on, flinging himself at a Swedish armchair and falling over the back of it, "— is," he said picking himself up and rearranging the mass of pencils behind his left ear, "— cast this thing for the toughest, most army-shod, grimmest woman you can find — age around thirty, if you get me, really ageless. Very dark, I think. You know how a Wagnerian soprano, a *good* Wagnerian soprano, say Flagstad,



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comes on — when she's really out there beefing it, knitting her brows, shaking her spear, say, in the Valkyrie? Nothing comic —"

"Got it, *got* it," I said. It looked like no lunch; I reached for the phone. "You don't have time to phone," he said. "The casting's in fifteen minutes, and it's way over five blocks off. Good-by."

On my way in the taxi I read the script — one of the copies he'd flung me. It was a mean commercial. One calculated to make the watching peasants hate it after the very first time it was exposed; but in their fascination and apathy they'd come back for more, I knew that. It didn't soft-sell any more than Mussolini addressing his people in an old newsreel; it got in there and blasted the onlooker with a right, a left, a right, a left, and then it conked him with a couple of absolutes. Get out there and *buy* or you'll fall apart and die, it said.

Except it wasn't addressed to a him; it was addressed to all the hers who'd have to see it — unless they were watching Public Service, which would prove their taste. Still, I thought, reading it again (it was just as bad the second time), the males would also be exposed to it; and it would take that much more gray matter out of their skulls, leave them that much more zonked.

When I got to Lilla Greenspan's — best casting director in the business, shrewd with a marshmallow exterior — she said, "Stanley, there are twenty peole waiting. Buzzy called and told me roughly what you wanted. I've got some *types*."

We spent from then until three pm looking at the types. They were all on the Greenspan payroll, under her guidance, and I must say they were a wonderful crew. Some had played scrubwomen most of their lives (two *had* been scrubwomen, and now were making it on residuals and hamming it up for the masses on the strength of their motherly old hard maps), and others had been in the lady-wrestling racket before it ceded to women roller derby artists. One was a man in drag, weighing about three hundred five, but his eyebrows were too cute to mess up with the heavy paint we'd need for this act. I mean it would have been cruel. The others were all good, but come the end of the line, I still didn't think we'd made it.

"Go home and let me think it over," I told them. "I'll give Lilla word tomorrow."

They exited, and we sat on Lilla's antique furniture and frowned.

"I don't *have* till tomorrow," I said. "We ought to start shooting by eight in the morning. Air date's breathing down my very nape."

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Lilla nodded and snapped her fingers with frustration. "I have some wrestlers, I mean the real men kind," she said, "but they're in Utah right now on location playing in a bank series."

"Do they hold up the bank?"

"No, only their muscles show. 'Money with Muscle,' is the theme."

We both thought a while. You could hear our brains grinding above the massive street sounds. All at once the front door opened (it's an impressive facade), and its glass swung back all the way. And the most beautiful and at the same time most forbidding face I've ever seen, topping a coal-black dress that might have come straight from an Italian fashion show, swept in. This woman had done something drastic to her hair, too; it was in a semi-Afro and it seemed too thick, too *alive*. She was about six feet three; she dominated that large hall. Across the way, Lilla's receptionist gave a small scream and then stood up to advance and do battle.

But by that time the tall woman — I'll never say she wasn't graceful — had bent her eyes upon Lilla. She spoke with a soft cold accent. "You run this place, miss?"

"Yes; I —"

"I need work. In your city is no place for genius? Talent, yes —" Her *S*ses were splendid, they seemed to slither around like the word susurration; they didn't all seem to be made with her strong slash of a mouth. "Mediocrity in acting, yes — but passion and true art, there is no position for one who has both of these in supreme abundance?"

"This is a casting agency," Lilla explained — she waved off the receptionist. "We work with ad agencies, sometimes with motion picture producers, to feed them talent. If you think you have any special qualifications that might interest—"

"Ahhh, qualifications —" She let the *s* on that go for at least two seconds. "I have never been in just this business, that is true; but I have astounded generations with my work in other places —"

Lilla said, "Do you have any pictures of yourself — any samples —"

By this time the woman was quite close to Lilla, as close as their different heights would allow. And Lilla backed up; small but full of fire, she seldom backs from anything but a squad car. Then I saw why. The woman had opened her eyes to their fullest extent, and they were tremendous. They were pits of black fire, but it was a cold flame. I caught just the single glimpse, and it was more than enough.

I said, "Hold it! Lilla, she's it.

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The delivery, the height, the — whatever she's done to her hair — the face, and the —"

"The eyes," said Lilla. "I gathered that..." It was the first time I ever saw Lilla scared.

"All right," I said. "Sign her up. She'll make them buy the stuff. *Make* them. They'll be afraid not to. She may even start a trend and get famous and have her own series." It was a hot day even in the air conditioning, but I shuddered. I said, softly, "She's the most loathsome creature since Carrie Nation. I neeed a drink."

"Wait'll I get the paperwork done and give her her assignment for morning," Lilla said. "I'll join you."

In the bar we talked it over. Lilla was still quaking a trifle. "Couldn't quite make out her name, something generally warm-country European, I think," she said. "Anyway she signed, and I hope she shows. She didn't say where she lived."

"I *hope* she shows," I said. "I hate it and I hope it. I don't even want to think about where she lives." I took a drink. "Do you know, in my career — as checkered as the board in a firehouse — I've directed bulls, bears, monkeys, once a gorilla, sheep, goats, and seventeen hundred different kinds of people, with that many kinds of hangups — but never yet have I approached a job with the kind of consternation eating at me now..."

Lilla fished for my olive. "Hey," she said. "That's funny —"

"What's wrong?"

"My fingers — my index finger and my thumb, rather, they seem all numb."

"Oh, go on, it's the gin —"

"They are numb," she said, shaking them. "It'll go away, I guess. Let's go over the script again."

We went over it. We had seven more drinks apiece, on Barton's Biodegradable.

On my way home my toes stopped working — not all of them, just those on my left foot. They seemed to have gone all stiff and funny. When I got in my luxurious apartment, I turned up the hi-fi full to "The Pines of Rome" — I like loud music to shut out my unhalcyon days — went to the couch and took off my shoes and socks. The great toe on that left foot and the toe next to it — the one that gets the number-two squeeze in "little pig went to market"— were quite hard; ossified. I was sure I hadn't drunk that much. When I snicked the toes, they made a flat ringing sound like good cement. I decided against calling a doctor — there wouldn't be time to see him before the shooting session — and

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after a while flopped into bed. The hi-fi stayed on, and the last thing I heard before I corked off was that welling passage at the end where the Valeria Victrix and everything else, including a theater organ, comes marching up the Appian Way. For the first time it seemed menacing — as though monsters were jumping on my ribs. And behind them.

Next morning it was raining like all there is, but nobody minded because even before the first take was in the can we could all tell, the whole crew, that we had something notable. Miss Sibilants of 1980 had showed up all right — same outfit, same hairdo. Same eyes. When she wasn't on camera or talking straight to you, she kept the eyes half shut; you could just get little peeps and wisps of the Hades behind those lids. But even so it was fearful; I was limping badly by now, and the stiffening seemed to have extended to my left kneecap.

Still, when you have a winner, you flaunt, fly, and ride with it; I did three versions of Buzzy's lousy sell-their-behinds-off commercial, and I must say everything was right. It might be the most powerful selling tool (as the chimps in public relations say) ever produced. One of the crew — the second cameraman — came over. "Phone, Stan. What's wrong with the leg?"

"I wouldn't guess," I said. "Maybe I was playing polo in my sleep."

Lilla Greenspan was on the phone. "Stan, it's spread to my whole hand. It's even —" She laughed nervously "—sort of beautiful. The hand, I mean. It's a good piece of sculpture, but it won't *work*. Pens fall out of it. Spoons don't stay in it. Not that I'll starve, I can use my left—"

I told her about my toes, foot, and leg to the kneecap.

Long silence. "Stan?"

"Yes—"

"She'll come back for her pay. Let's do something, and let's think about releasing that commercial..."

"I want Buzzy to see it."

"Mmmmmm—" Doubtfully. Very doubtfully. "I suppose so — have him wear dark glasses!"

"Okay, *see* you," I said fast, because I'd just remembered that *she* was still back there with the crew. I zipped back to the sound stage, but they told me she'd gone. The script girl, Zena, was rubbing her ears. She looked up at me.

"Craziest thing. My ears feel like they're turning to asphalt. Touch one."

It felt like asphalt, yes, or maybe granite. I told the film crew to call me the second they had the neg through the lab and a print ready for the Movieola, and limped out into the rain. The doctor I went

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to was fascinated; he *dinged* my leg with a little metal hammer and smiled in his satisfaction over finding a case like no other that had been handed him during his thievish practice.

He named several diseases it could have been but wasn't.

"Like to run a series of tests —"

"Can you stop it from going on up to the hip and maybe higher?"

"Well, now, until we isolate—"

I was limping even more when I left his office. I added the cost of his services — *services!* — to my expense account, in my head (incurred in line of duty, after all), and went to the agency. Then, in spite of my petrified leg, the day went along fast, what with a flock of new commercials to assess and put a rough price on and a lot of story boards to look over with old wild Buzzy, and it wasn't till ten when I left the hot shop. I went straight home and ate something filling but ungood and fell into the sack.

When I woke it was just daylight and the phone was yammering.

"Stanley —"

"What?" I said uncomfortably. My right fingers were quite stiff. The rigidity of my leg was the same as it had been, though; I was glad I could still get around.

"Stanley," Lilla reported, "— now it's *my* leg. So shaming to try to bend it for panty hose."

"You'll make out," I said. "Keep a hawke's eye on your place of business; don't let her get away when she comes in... and *you* wear dark glasses."

When she'd hung up I called the film outfit. They had put a rush on the film, and it would be back from the lab at three. Jeb Prentiss, the film producer, said some rare affliction was hitting all his people; Zena couldn't hear out of either ear, two grips and a gopher had trouble walking, and he himself had no sensation whatsoever in his nose.

"It's this pollution count," he marveled mournfully.

I soothed him as best I could and stayed home until two thirty, when I cabbed to his studios. In the back room all his crew was gathered around the Movieola, which was making its steady clacking as the print ran through. They made way for me, and I hunkered over the small hooded screen. There she was; her eyes were wide open, terribly open... and on the track with its slightly off-key Movieola rendition she was saying, "*Buy* it! Barton's Biodegradable Detergent! It will *clean* your fragile underthings like the *sun!*" The sibilants went on and on — they lingered in the inner ear.

I reached around and stopped the machine. "Don't run it again;

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don't look at it till Buzzy gets here," I told everybody. "That's an order, a real one."

My nose itched. When I went to scratch it, it felt like a rock. I called Buzzy and told him to rush right over and wear dark glasses, the darker the greater.

He came roaring in, tripping over himself and spouting ideas, half an hour later. He'd forgotten the shades and so I borrowed some for him. "The light's strong," I said. "Could burn a retina." Like most creative directors he knew less about film than an Australian bushman. He put them on.

When he'd looked at it, he went into five or six kinds of fits, clapped me on the back, jumped around, fell over a camera cable, scrambled up, and went frabjous again. "What a woman...what a spot!"

"Forget it," I said. "She died this morning. And her heirs and assigns refuse to let the spot go on the air."

I was as firm as — well, as stone. I stayed that way through his tantrums, tears, pleas, and snide offers of high money. After a time he left, sulking.

I went back to Lilla's place and we waited. It was late afternoon before *she* came sweeping in. Following her was a lean well-muscled man with a cap of golden curly hair. She ran screaming — and, my God, she could scream — to Lilla, who climbed up on a chair and shut her eyes and said, weakly, "Please let us talk to you — we'll pay you, but please —!"

I had very dark shades on; through them all this played itself out like a night scene in an early German movie.

"What she means," I said to Miss Cold Darkness, "is, we want to make a deal. We'll pay you never to show up again here or, we hope, anywhere. Clear?"

She almost bridled. "Ah! So great genius, it is too shocking for your weak mortal eyes!"

"Absolutely," I said. "You hit it."

The golden-haired man said, "My name is Perce, and I am her enemy — she is mine. I am a hairdresser and I merely wish to do her hair —" He reached a hand toward her hairdo, and something in the hairdo moved, restively. Oh, I could see that all right, no matter how smokily. Lilla stayed on the chair. Miss Loathsome-if-Gorgeous screamed at her again, "My money, give me it, I must go before he touches my hair —"

She was looking straight at Lilla, and sooner or later I knew Lilla would open her eyes and meet those others.

Perce was advancing on Miss Terrible. Miss Terrible sidled away.

I dug into my pocket and got

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my wallet and threw it at her. She caught it neatly and then ran out — and as she went through the door, Perce the hairdresser at her heels, things in that awful hair raised their heads and hissed back at us; then she and Perce were both out in the avenue crowd. And out of, thank Zeus, sight.

Lilla got down from the chair. I went over to the phone and called the film outfit. "Burn it," I said. "Every frame. Those are orders too."

Sometimes this season (with the ratings going up one side, down the other like seesaws and the hot shop seething and everybody playing musical chairs, with Buzzy the most musical of them all) I wonder what would have happened if we'd let the spot go on. I think of those millions and millions — is it three-fourths of the nation? — sitting like frogs in a marsh and slowly turning to complete stonework as far as the eye can reach. Sales of Barton's Detergent would have zoomed, until nobody could see any more or even move around enough to buy laundry soap. It's a boggling picture. But as Lilla says, "Perce must've caught her." Because Lilla's hand and her nice leg got all right. As did my leg and the rest of me. Everybody's affliction went away. I tried, the other day, to make out the handwriting on the contract *she* signed with Lilla, before I tore it up. Med something; well, Med-I-am-afraid-to-say-what, even though down deep, I know.

Let's just play it cool and watch the tube for the misused marvel it is and say that I think Meddy's gone — for good.


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Herbie Brennan ("Final Appeal," March 1965) has worked in advertising and journalism in Ireland and is now a freelance writer with three published books on the supernatural. "I've sold short stories —mostly domestic comedy and light romance, believe it or not— in Britain, Ireland, Norway, Denmark and Sweden. My first play was just accepted by the BBC. I was raised on science fiction and, so far as I know, I'm the first writer on earth to sell a science fiction story to any of the mass circulation British women's magazines."

# A Paper Twist of Khorlo Crystals

## by HERBIE BRENNAN

They were smallish crystal flakes, white and brittle like sea salt. There were enough of them in the paper twist to cover the surface of a native julian. Gorham looked up. "What are they?"

"The natives call them *khorlo* crystals," Herrik said. He was a young man, prematurely grey and painfully thin. His hands rested on the tabletop like reminders of famine, but the slim frame crackled with enthusiasm. His prime characteristic seemed to be enthusiasm — that and curiousity.

Gorham examined the crystals again, jigging the paper twist in his hand as if he could somehow judge the weight. The lines on his forehead deepened imperceptibly. The *lo* of *khorlo* meant the crystals had some religious connotation. "Where did you get them?" he asked casually. Herrik had a good record, but he was young enough to be rash.

"I bought them, actually."

Gorham relaxed. His mind, he realized suddenly, had been chasing down a very ancient plot line: white man steals holy emerald from forehead of native idol — and if the curse doesn't get him, the natives certainly will. He set the twist down



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on the table, looked at Herrik and smiled. "Cost you much?"

"Depends how you look at it, I suppose. I had to trade my watch." He caught Gorham's expression and added defensively, "I think I might have been lucky even at that. The trouble is they have religious associations —"

"Yes, I gathered there must be religious associations from the name."

Herrik picked up the paper and very carefully closed the twist. He dropped it into a little box and snapped the lid shut. "Well, it makes them difficult to come by. I think the priests may have quietly proscribed them to outworlders." He grinned, impishly.

Gorham coughed. "I assume you were...discreet?"

It was mildly enough said, but sank home. "Very discreet, sir," Herrik told him quickly. "Very."

It was probably true enough. After all, Herrik had considerable experience in the service even if he was under forty. Gorham sighed. "I'm sorry. I seem to think like an old woman nowadays."

"I appreciate your point, sir. I don't think anyone could criticize your caution after..."

He was obviously going to say "after Sigma Two" but had remembered in time Gorham's oblique connection with that particular fiasco. A look of embarrassment began to form on his features. Then Gorham let him off the hook by supplying a simile too far buried in the past to bring up modern skeletons. "After our experience on Centuria?"

"Exactly, sir. Exactly what I was thinking."

Gorham held his face straight at the outright lie. After a little while, Herrik dropped the box into the pocket of his shirt. He was not, Gorham knew, completely at ease. He seemed to feel a barrier between himself and his superior. But he liked to give the impression of relaxation, and Gorham diplomatically never tried to probe beneath the surface.

They were sitting on the veranda of the administration building, which served Gorham both as offices and as home. It was a rambling structure, part stone and part native wood, built to the grandiose design so popular when the Empire was in the initial stages of expansion. Despite appearances, the house incorporated several very useful architectural features, perhaps by accident, but rather more likely because native advice had been wisely, if uncharacteristically, sought when it was being built.

For some reason, Gorham found himself thinking about the Second Wave theory. He had a feeling it was going to be accepted eventually, whatever the current

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scientific consensus about parallel evolution. He sighed again. There were so many bloody mysteries.

"What do they use the stuff for?" he asked suddenly.

"I don't know yet, not exactly. It's part of their Bindu Rite."

"That's the hush-hush one, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

Gorham gazed over the sweep of smooth-cropped lawns to the beginning of his cultivated jungle. It extended several hundred acres, sown with every safe example of the region's flora and hiding several highly poisonous examples which had taken root from airborne spores.

It was a folly, a gigantic example of idiot extravagance. The real jungle began less than a mile from the borders of the estate. The only difference between the two was that Gorham's cultivation sheltered no dangerous fauna except the snakes and scorpions which were everywhere. His sole consolation was that he had not ordered this monstrous stupidity. It had been planted by the first governor, a flamboyant man caught up in the euphoria of consolidating conquest. He had been slaughter by a native in the Rising at a time when his behavior had grown so unpredictable that even the service must have felt slightly relieved.

His death left the folly to his successor, Sir Ivan Shaw, who had a reputation for wasting nothing. Shaw liked walking in his younger days and had a series of meandering paths constructed, irradiating the soil lightly to keep them free of vegetation. He held office to the incredible age of ninety-nine when he was forcibly retired, protesting vigorously that he was good for at least another fifty years. Gorham had taken his place, inheriting the folly and the paths, if not quite the same mania for walking. Old Sir Ivan settled on Centima, took to farming and was now proving an earlier point by remaining fit and vigorous although he had celebrated his 120th birthday several months ago. He was a living legend in the service. Some of the more superstitious natives were convinced he was immortal — a sentiment with which Gorham, reading the latest reports from Centima, was hard put to disagree.

He had a theory planets reached out to preserve the men who loved them. Certainly Shaw had lavished love on Kyisi. And even Dawson, Shaw's assistant, was well past ninety when he died. It was a comfortable theory for Gorham, who suspected he too might well live forever if it happened to be true.

"...what it is," Herrik was saying. "I intend to have it

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analyzed."

Gorham leaned back and called, *"Chod!"* The sun was dropping towards the horizon, but the temperature continued to rise as it would continue to rise for the next appalling hour. The Dhakestri slept between three and four. The service had a different custom — one which Gorham fondly believed had kept him sane in the days before his body adjusted to the climate.

Norbu Zang appeared presently. He walked lightly on the wood floor of the veranda, so that even the loose board by the wicker chair failed to creak.

"The usual for Mr. Herrik and myself," Gorham murmured. "And you might ask Lady Anna if she'd care to join us."

Zang nodded and withdrew. He was a fairly typical example of native stock: stubby, beardless and blue-skinned, with the soft feminine eyes of a born introvert. He moved with considerable grace, a characteristic of the breed, like their obsession with religion. The women were even more graceful, sometimes appearing almost to live a dance.

How anyone could consider Zang the product of a parallel evolution was amazing. Empire stock and Dhakestri could interbreed with ease, as many a young blood in the service had discovered to his dismay. There was scarcely a chance in a billion of that happening as a result of parallel evolutions. Yet the scientific establishment preferred those odds to any admission that a prehistoric wave of space migration had, in fact, been possible.

Gorham stretched his feet and folded his hands comfortably across his stomach in pleasurable anticipation of the social hour. He was sorry Herrik had not married. Another woman would brighten the place. Anna did her best, God help her, but...

"What are you going to do with all this information you're collecting on the natives?" he asked curiously. "Write a book or something?"

It was meant as a joke, but Herrik took it seriously. "As a matter of fact, that had crossed my mind."

"No money in books nowadays," Gorham said. He knew Herrik was interested in money, perhaps even before position. He tugged his earlobe thoughtfully. "Unless, of course, the networks take it up and dramatize it. Can't see that happening, though, not with anything you'd find here — all far too tame." It would have been different, he thought, if Herrik had interested himself in history. The Rising was bloody enough to satisfy any network executive. But since

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then the whole planet seemed to have sunk into something close to lethargy. One still had to be careful of course — especially where dealings with the Brahmins or the monarchy were concerned. But one expected that whatever the conditions.

"I don't expect to make money from it, sir," Herrik said. "I just have the feeling there are some aspects of native culture which deserve to be recorded."

It was a surprisingly perceptive comment, and one that Gorham appreciated. Old Sir Ivan saw the natives as raw material to be cosseted and exploited — a perfectly proper viewpoint for a second-generation governor. But no situation remained static, as the service historians never tired of pointing out. The policies which served Sir Ivan could not be administered forever if stability was to be maintained. It was one of the reasons they had forced the old warhorse to retire. His mind no longer had the resilience to learn new attitudes.

With Gorham, on the other hand, many of the necessary attitudes were virtually inbred. He had, for instance, a curious appreciation of native philosophy. He seldom discussed it and often pretended ignorance of religious customs. But privately he was aware of a certain profundity to the Dhakestri viewpoint. Sir Ivan, much as he liked the natives, had thought them superstitious.

Norbu Zang appeared again, pushing Lady Anna's wheelchair. She smiled, quite radiantly. "Malcolm, how good to see you — I didn't realize you'd walked over." She turned accusing eyes on Gorham. "Really, darling, you should have told me." She was a slender woman with pure white hair and fine patrician features. She had once been strikingly beautiful: Gorham, who had worked on four planets, once remarked with neither prejudice nor exaggeration that he had never seen her equal. The attitudes of beauty remained now that the actuality was gone. They remained as a certain serenity and a self-confidence that had survived the amputated legs.

Her voice had not changed. Gorham could close his eyes and hear the girl of twenty-five. He smiled at her and she smiled back fondly. She understood him very well. There was still, despite age and certain past misfortunes, a great deal of love between them.

"Can't have you monopolizing him when there's business to discuss," he told her.

"I'm quite sure you weren't discussing business in any shape or form."

Zang leaned over and murmured something to her. She

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looked up into the solicitous blue features and said, "Perfectly, thank you, Norbu Zang."

"Are you going to risk your digestion with us, my dear?"

"You know, I think perhaps I might."

Gorham nodded to Zang, then found himself watching as he left to get the drinks. The fluid movements of the natives were hypnotic. They added beauty to a race not always physically attractive.

"What have you really been talking about?" Lady Anna asked Herrik.

"Well, I suppose it was business in a way," Herrik said. "I was just showing these to Sir John." He produced the little box again and took out the paper twist.

As he opened it, Lady Anna leaned over to look. "What are they?"

"They're called *khorlo* crystals. The natives use them in one of their rites."

"How intriguing. What effect do they have?"

"That's what Malcolm's trying to find out. He's going to have them analyzed."

"How intriguing," she repeated. She had taken the twist to examine the crystals and now handed it back to Herrik.

A thought occurred to Gorham. "What do the natives say they're supposed to do?" He had a healthy respect for native explanations. They were sometimes bizarre, but usually contained a kernel of hard fact. At the back of his mind, he kept feeling it faintly odd that he had not come across the crystals before.

"They're a bit cagey," Herrik admitted. "At least the few I talked to were. To tell the truth, I didn't do much digging. I was rather pleased to get the crystals — I didn't really want to push my luck."

"Didn't you get any clue?" Lady Anna asked.

Herrik closed his little box. "Seems to have something to do with reincarnation notions. But beyond that...well, your guess and all that."

Nobru Zang appeared carrying a tray with a bottle, three glasses and an ice container.

"Ah," Gorham said. It was a sound of supreme satisfaction. He watched as Zang dropped ice into each glass and added a liberal quantity of liquor. It was a native distillation, referred to by three service generations as "Rangoon Wallop" and packed, so a chemist had once told him, with the most revolting impurities. But it was nearly twice as strong as the legal maximum allowable on more civilized worlds, and Gorham accepted his glass gratefully. It was his favorite anesthetic against the

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high heat of the afternoon, his relaxant and his stimulant. The doctors assured him it would rot his liver and shave years off his life. He raised his glass and smiled through the amber fluid. "Your health!" he said, and drank.

Some distant corner of his mind was being nibbled by the thought of Herrik's *khorlo* crystals, but the alcohol burned out this curious unease on its delightful journey to his innards.

Gorham fastened the stiff formal collar, then buckled on his silver pistol with the bandoleer of silver bullets. Both the weapon and the harness were extraordinarily heavy. He wondered, as he had often wondered before, what the reaction would be if he requested plasteel-silvered imitations forwarded for cerémonial use. They'd refuse, presumably. Anything but silver would be a gross breach of tradition; although the natives wouldn't know the difference. He sighed.

"Your hat, sir," Norbu Zang handed him the final item of his Planetary Governor's uniform. It was the ultimate lunacy in the present climate. It was necessary to wear some sort of headgear in order to avoid sunstroke, and utilitarian considerations forced a standard pattern. Hats which did the job were flimsy, well ventilated and light in color to reflect the heat. His uniform hat was heavy, poorly ventilated and dark in color. He sighed again and tucked it under his arm before walking into the bedroom to say good-by to Anna. The coach, he knew, would be waiting for him by this time. His ceremonial uniform was so incredibly uncomfortable that he always left dressing to the last possible second. He was not looking forward to the celebrations.

Lady Anna smiled at him from the bed as he walked in. "You look magnificent, John."

"Don't feel it," Gorham said. "I wish to God somebody would design a dress uniform that wasn't torture to wear."

Anna smiled mischievously. "But if they did, governors wouldn't feel virtuous after they've survived a state occasion."

"I suppose there's that to it." He could see the outline of her body underneath the sheet. It stopped with shocking abruptness at the curve of the knee. He could never quite adjust to the sight, even after all these years. "Will you be all right, my dear?" His eyes flickered over the room. The windows were wide open, with the insect netting firmly in place. Her wheelchair was next to the bed.

"Norbu or Hari will look after me if I need anything."

Gorham grunted and leaned

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over to kiss her. If only the accident had happened on a civilized planet where there might have been some alternative to surgery. But it hadn't, and that was that. Extraordinary, though, how the experience had failed to sour her against Kyisi. Or him, for that matter.

As he walked down the front steps, the escort snappily presented arms. The rifles were almost as much of an anachronism as his silver pistol — old Enfield lasers that only gave twenty-five bursts before it was necessary to fit another power pack. But they had a symbolic value, like the little garrison itself. They represented the Army of the Empire, the ships and modern weaponry and endless streams of men who would arrive within a month of any attack on the Imperial Representative.

Not that the symbol was ever likely to be needed in Gorham's time. He was rather proud of the good will he'd generated among the Dhakestri since his appointment and considered it a far greater protection than any garrison or punitive fleet.

He climbed stiffly into the coach. Without air conditioning, the inside was like an oven. He settled back and waited for the journey to begin, consoling himself with the reminder that it would take a little less than half an hour. But he had the feeling it would seem longer: it always did now that Anna could no longer accompany him.

He was sweating profusely by the time he arrived at the temple.

The temple was an architectural masterpiece, for this or any other world. It had been built, so native tradition averred, one thousand four hundred years ago, although the actual date of construction was probably only about seven hundred years before the first outworlder contact. It was — and this part of the legend seemed substantially correct — a tribute in stone, brass and marble, to a beautiful woman.

Dhakestri notions of feminine beauty were a little stark for Gorham's taste, but one tended to ignore such niceties in the face of the undoubted beauty of the story. A Dhak king, a man of noble birth and great piety, fell in love with a princess in the days of his youth. In winning her, he overcame innumerable hardships, including battle with a dragon. (In those days, the Dhakestri would swear straight-faced, there were dragons on the planet.) Finally she consented — or was it that her parents consented? Gorham could not remember — to become his wife. They lived an idyllic existence for a number of years until the woman — what was her name? something like Shalima — died in childbirth. The king

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ordered a temple built and dedicated to her memory.

There had been few changes in the facade. That particular branch of the monarchy had gone into decline (one reason why accurate historical information about the building was so confused), but subsequent rulers, and especially the priesthood, had been appreciative enough of fine architecture to preserve the temple without change. It was fronted by gardens and a deep, still, artificial lake which reflected the shimmering white stone, with its marble pillars and high-domed roof of brass.

It was the brass roof that caused the trouble, of course. Well-kept gardens delighted the eye. The lake, constantly renewed by welling springs deep underground, created a pocket of coolness through the enervating afternoons. But the metal dome soaked in heat and threw it downwards like an oven.

With incense burners and the crush of native bodies, the temple atmosphere was so oppressive, so overpowering that it had taken Gorham literally two years of careful acclimatization before he could remain comfortably inside for much more than an hour.

By now — of necessity — he could manage the best part of a day and would have to manage the best part of a day for the present celebrations. But as he took his place in the reserved enclosure, he could not suppress an envious thought for his predecessor. Old Sir Ivan had courageously solved the problem by refusing pointblank all invitations to religious functions. His attitude had drawn frequent rebukes from his service superiors, but even in the early days his prestige had been such that he could afford to ignore them.

Gorham sat. His escort, a dozen men, drew up in two rows behind him. There were chairs provided, the only ones in the entire temple. The natives preferred to squat and actually found outworlder furniture uncomfortable. One of the few who endured the discomfort was the old Dhak High Priest Qas Nirim, who came now to take the chair on Gorham's right.

Gorham nodded tightly to the priest. They were friends, as close friends as the difference in their cultures would allow, but the public proprieties had to be observed. It was a necessity for Nirim to make token obeisance to the civil power, but as a member of the Dhak priesthood, too close intimacy with one beyond the caste would be almost as damning as intercourse with a woman.

All public show, of course. Qas Nirim was highly orthodox, but hardly superstitious. In private, many barriers came down. On one occasion Gorham had even seen

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him talk to Anna as an equal — something which would have shocked his followers to their inmost being.

The main processional was filing in, and it was a small consolation to note that some of the ornate religious costumes must have been quite as hot and heavy — if not *quite* so uncomfortable — as Gorham's own. There was silence in the temple so that, as the monks filed in, he could hear the *slap-slap* of their bare feet on the stone flag floor. They drew up before the looming giltwood statue of Maitreya, bowed once, then began the chanting which, Gorham knew from dire experience, would rumble on hypnotically for hours. He closed his eyes and uttered a silent prayer to his own God and any native deity who might be listening, for patience and a swift passage of time.

The language of the chant was an archaic form well beyond his comprehension so that he had not even the tiny consolation of following the service. He knew, because Qas Nirim had told him so, that the monks were chanting an epic poem of incomprehensible antiquity and length. It was, in fact, so long that only portions could be incorporated in these annual festivities. So far as Gorham was aware, no section had been repeated in the twenty-one years he had served on the planet. The sound washed over him, wave upon wave.

"Your Excellency endured the ordeal well," Qas Nirim remarked with mock gravity. He was a little taller and a little leaner than the average native, but the real distinguishing characteristic was his beard. Something in the native gene make-up seemed to create a scarcity of beards. Old Sir Ivan's — a massive Viking affair, roaring red before it turned grey — had been the wonder of the age. Nirim's beard came nowhere near to matching up, but it was a remarkable production for a native just the same. Perhaps prayer acted as a fertilizer for facial hair.

"My Excellency will still be damn glad of that drink you promised," Gorham grinned. The liquor would be warm, for the Dhakestri had no way to manufacture ice. But in a way that was all to the better: it allowed certain subtle flavors to gather on the taste buds.

He watched the servant glide from Qas Nirim's quarters and asked comfortably, "What story was the epic telling this year?" It was not simple politeness. Religion formed an integral and important part of Dhakestri culture, and so no effort made to understand it was wasted. Besides, he was interested.

"We sang of cycles and of spirals," Nirim told him. "You are,

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I know, familiar with out —" He hesitated, smiling, then went on, "— strange ideas about the Breath of Dhak..."

"Indeed, yes," Gorham said. He admired Nirim's attitude: it was comfortably lacking in fanaticism. He explained Dhakestri philosophy coolly, obviously well aware that many of the doctrines were symbolic. He had, in fact, explained the Breath of Dhak theory to Gorham in those distant days before Gorham was knighted or he himself had become leader of the religious community. Dhak exhaled and the universe came into being. At the end of an eon lasting God alone knew how many billion years, Dhak inhaled and reabsorbed everything. It was an interesting analogy for the notion — still held by several Empire scientists — that existence originated in an antimatter state and would eventually return to antimatter. He coughed. "Afraid I find it difficult to get excited about cosmology. No matter what theory you come up with, the whole thing always seems a bit unreal."

"Perhaps," Qas Nirim agreed. Or did he agree: it was difficult to read much into the impassive features. "However, such theories — assuming, of course, they have some truth in them — will sometimes touch our lives in places."

The servant reappeared and Gorham accepted his drink. Nirim received a glass too, but it would contain, Gorham knew, either water or, if the old priest was feeling particularly dissolute, fruit juice. Gorham drank, wondering if Rangoon Wallop might not be worth all the religious theories of the past ten thousand years. He looked round the room. Nirim was no Spartan. His quarters were richly furnished, with taste and restraint. He looked back at the priest, lifted his glass slightly and said, "It all seems a long way from metaphysics."

"Indeed." This time it was an agreement. "But remember our cycles." He smiled gently. "All this — even this — has been before."

"You're talking about reincarnation?" Gorham asked. The word threw something to the forefront of his mind with such force that he realized instantly he must have been worrying about it subliminally from the moment Herrik brought it up.

"Oh, no, John, not reincarnation." Nirim had a pleasant, slightly high-pitched voice and a rhythm of speech which could at times take on the fascination of poetry. With a better grasp of imagery and less religious feeling, he might actually have become a poet. But he had little time for images: his mind roamed through

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the rarefied atmosphere of philosophical abstractions. "We move forward through reincarnation. The cycles ensure we also return."

He wanted to ask about the crystals, but manners forbade an abrupt change of subject. He forced himself to think about what Nirim was saying and eventually asked, "Are you telling me Time is circular?"

"Not exactly: it is more in the nature of a spiral. And that only from one specific viewpoint." He smiled.

That was the infuriating thing about Dhakestri philosophy: you could never tie it down. One minute they appeared to be saying one thing, the next it was something else. What mde it worse was that the entire native population appeared perfectly happy to accept the contradictions. Parallel evolution or not, their mental processes were alien.

Gorham tried again, for clarity. "What you're saying, to take a concrete example, is that sometime in the past, you and I have sat here in this room discussing the same problem?" *Or some other version of you and me,* he thought, *in some other version of this room.* It opened into endless damnable complexities.

Nirim added to them. "Not in the past — in some other Time."

It sounded the same thing, but Gorham let it go. "Allowing for that, have I got it?"

The apologetic smile again. "Not exactly. The cycle is not a circle, but a spiral. Things do not repeat themselves exactly, only by analogy. In other words, if we could see the previous fragment of the spiral, we might not find a Dhakestri people ruled —" he inclined his head fractionally "— by the cultured representative of a great Empire from another world. But we would find a similar situation, a parallel situation."

"With parallel people?" Gorham asked curiously.

"Perhaps," Nirim nodded.

There was silence in the room. Gorham seized his opportunity. "I want to ask you something, Qas: what are *khorlo* crystals?"

The brown eyes locked on his for the space of several seconds, then Qas Nirim asked quietly, "Why do you want to know, my old friend?"

Gorham briefly considered the alternatives, then decided to risk the truth. "Herrik bought some."

"Herrik? The young administrator —"

Gorham nodded. "I was afraid outworlder possession of the crystals might not be lawful." He used a native word that had no actual English equivalent. It had shades of meaning. "In accordance with your religious custom" was

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one. "In accordance with universal morality" was another.

Qas Nirim sat silent, his thoughts apparently turned inwards. Eventually he said, "I had hoped you might never have discovered *khorlo*. How was this boy able to purchase the crystals?"

"Quite easily, from what he told me."

"In that case, he was lying," Qas Nirim said thoughtfully. "There are many proscriptions surrounding the crystals. It is forbidden even to mention them in the presence of an outworlder."

"I'm sorry, Qas," Gorham said, Unconsciously he had feared something like this. He could see a hell of a stink coming. There would have to be a full investigation, and the best he could hope for Herrik would be a transfer to some other planet. He might even be flung out of the service on his ear, but he would damn well deserve it if he'd tried to pull the wool over everybody's eyes. Gorham frowned. "You know my views about interfering with another man's religion — and that goes for trying to break his taboos."

"It is your character to worry about giving offense to my people," Qas Nirim said, "but in this instance, that need not concern you. The proscriptions surrounding *khorlo* crystals were imposed to safeguard our friends of the Empire."

Gorham's frown deepened. "Safeguard — ? What on earth are the crystals supposed to do, Qas?"

"They are a drug," Nirim said. "The action is to disengage the spirit and temporarily reverse its flow along one's life line."

Gorham finished off his drink wondering what the hell that meant.

"How was it, darling?" Anna asked.

"Sorry, did I waken you? I was trying to creep in quietly."

"No, I was awake. It's such a lovely night. I was lying listening to the noises it makes. Was it horrible?"

Gorham began undressing in the darkness. "The temple ceremonies were worse than usual, if anything. But I had an interesting discussion with Qas Nirim afterwards. That young fool Herrik's broken one of their taboos with his blasted *khorlo* crystals. Probably lied to me about how he got them too."

"Malcolm? Why should he do that?"

"God knows. You'd think with his experience he'd know how touchy people are about their religion. I can smell a lot of trouble coming out of this." He remembered his own mistakes on Sigma Two and added in a less heated

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tone, "Still, the one good thing in the whole mess is that the taboo seems to have been put on for our benefit."

"Ours? Yours and mine?"

"No, I mean outworlders in general. I was finding Qas particularly hard to follow, but I have the idea he thinks the crystals might be bad for us because we operate outside the Dhakestri culture."

"A little superstitious for Qas, isn't it?" He could almost see the puzzled frown on her face.

Gorham reached for his pajamas. "Not necessarily. He may mean that unless *khorlo's* taken in conjunction with the Dhakestri disciplines, it could have a bad effect. Like the stuff they found on Centima — the cactus stuff. The primitives could handle it all right because they took it as part of their religion, only had it twice a year. But once our boys got hold of it, the kids started using it for kicks until they banned export. It could be something like that." He climbed into bed, adding belatedly, "It's a drug, of course."

"But what does it *do?*" Anna pressed. "Give you ecstatic visions and a nasty hangover?"

"Possibly. I couldn't follow Qas on that at all. He kept on about life lines."

"That's on your hand, darling — he couldn't have said that."

Despite his overall annoyance, Gorham grinned into the darkness. "I expect I've got it wrong." For no reason, he found himself wondering if another Imperial Civil Service was really administering the lives of blue-skinned Dhakestri in another dimension of spiral time. He turned on his side to prepare for sleep, then added as an afterthought, "I've got my own sample of the stuff now. Qas thought I'd better know what I was dealing with." He grinned again. "Know where he keeps his supply? In a pocket in his turban!"

Gorham set his little store of *khorlo* crystals on the edge of a report sheet and stared at them. It astonished him that in a twenty-one-year contact with the Dhakestri he had never heard of them before Herrik suddenly produced his find.

And that was another mystery. If young Herrik was up to anything, why broadcast the fact he'd got the crystals in the first place? Unless he realized Gorham was bound to hear and he was trying to spike guns.

Gorham pressed one finger on a single flake and watched it adhere. The drug was neither toxic nor addictive, but it was, apparently, quite potent. He kept thinking coincidentally, that perhaps Qas had been mistaken in his estimate that Herrik had been lying. Gorham fancied he knew Herrik

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well enough to spot any attempt at lying. And it was a fact of human nature that whether the regulations were drawn up by the civil or the religious authorities, whether by outworlders or by natives, there would always be someone, sooner or later, prepared to break them.

Gorham stood up suddenly and walked from his office into the little washroom. He prepared a smallish quantity of crystals, placed it on his tongue and washed it down with a tumbler of water. There was an unpleasant bitter taste on his tongue as he walked back to the office, but he was experiencing a sense of satisfaction. It was the sort of satisfaction small boys feel when, after battling unsuccessfully with temptation, they press a mysterious button. The button may bring down the sky or, more likely, parental retribution, but such distant disasters pale against the immediate satisfaction. For Gorham, it was the satisfaction of knowing he would soon understand what Qas Nirim had been talking about when he attempted to describe the effects of the drug.

He waited and slowly the sense of satisfaction evaporated. No changes in perception, far-reaching or otherwise, occurred. He brushed up the remainder of the crystals and dropped them into a little box which he locked away in the file. He waited another fifteen minutes with the creeping realization that he had taken too small a dose, then went back to work.

Rather later in the morning he felt a sense of heaviness about the head. He did not associate it with the crystals, but eventually it grew so pronounced that he retired from his office to his room in order to lie down.

"Paging Mr. Gorham....paging Mr. Gorham....Mr. Gorham, please...."

"Excuse me." Gorham turned away from the effete young man who had been talking languidly about the political situation on Farraday and signaled to the boy. "Over here!"

He was treated to a snappy salute that had not one ounce of respect in it. "Cap'n's compliments, Mr. Gorham, and would you and Mrs. Gorham care to join him in the stateroom?"

"Thank you," Gorham said.

The boy hesitated. "Know where it is, sir?"

Gorham suppressed a smile. "Yes, thank you."

He finished his drink, made his apologies to the effete young man and left the bar debating whether he should disturb Anna. If it had been a normal social invitation, he would probably have left her be. But the timing made this one rather special. She would hardly forgive

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him for depriving her of first sight of their new home. The thought made up his mind, and he walked to their cabin.

She had the lighting level low.

"Is that you, darling?"

"Yes," Gorham said. He came into the gloom carefully and closed the door. "How are you feeling?"

"As bloody as ever, frankly." His eyes were adjusting now, and he could see the strain on her face. She was lying on the bed, eyes shut. "I'm sorry, I'm making this a miserable voyage for you."

"Can't be helped," Gorham told her. He sat on the edge of the bed, searched for her hand and held it.

"But it's your big trip, darling. You should be glorying in it. Not many men of forty get a governship."

Gorham smiled slightly. She was, if anything, more excited about the appointment than he was. "The captain wants us in the stateroom, darling," he said gently. "I think we may be coming in to planetfall."

Her eyes opened and the frown eased. She began to struggle off the bed.

"Are you sure you feel up to it?" Gorham asked anxiously.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," she told him. "After all, it's only space sickness." She smiled bravely. "Never known to be fatal."

The huge panoramic vision screen that took up one entire side of the stateroom was blank, although the faintest flicker round the edges showed it had already been switched on in preparation for Transition. Captain Hayter had been talking on the telephone; he switched it off as they came in. There were several other couples wandering around, sipping cocktails and making desultory conversation. Both the Bensons and the Lombards were there, Gorham noticed, fortunately with their backs turned. He caught Anna's arm and detoured to avoid them. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Millicent Terri bearing down on them and groaned inwardly. But then Hayter saw them and saved the situation by sweeping over with his hand outstretched.

"My dear Mrs. Gorham, how good to see you. Feeling better?"

"A little," Anna smiled.

He turned to Gorham. "You realize I should be calling you Your Excellency now."

"We're inside the limit, are we?" Gorham asked.

"Technically." He grabbed glasses from a passing tray and handed them to Gorham and his wife. Anna protested feebly that she couldn't really face liquor at the moment, but he overrode her with a hearty assurance that it was the best known cure for space sickness.

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"How long before..." Gorham began.

"Any second," Hayter said. "I was beginning to worry that you wouldn't make it here in time. That would have been a real tragedy."

"Yes," Gorham nodded, "I suppose it would have, in a way."

"You must —" Hayter started saying as he turned to Anna. Then the ship shuddered as it passed through the Transition. Gorham, taken unawares, spilled some of his drink and was searching for a handkerchief to mop down his lapel when the sudden silence of the stateroom impinged on his consciousness. He looked up to find the vision screen was filled with the planetary image.

He stared, as open-mouthed as the rest. First sight of any planet was always a striking experience; first sight of Kyisi was staggering. It shimmered and danced on the screen, an effect derived from the vast quantities of surface water. In his initial briefing, Gorham suddenly remembered, he had been told certain approaches gave virtually no sight of land at all. But this was not one of them. The land masses stood out, stark and magnificent: the polar wastes and the eastern deserts; that huge equatorial region which cradled a developing humanity scarcely out of the Stone Age. And to the west, Havarenda, continental home of the blue-skinned Dhakestri and center of the Colonial Administration.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Hayter announced loudly. He waited while heads swung round in his direction. "We are now within the legal off-planetary limits of Kyisi. I would ask you to raise your glasses in a toast to the new governor of that world...and to his charming lady..." He turned towards Gorham and Anna and lifted his own glass. "Their Excellencies!"

Glasses clinked to murmurs of "Their Excellencies." Gorham felt Anna's hand rest lightly on his arm. He looked around to find her eyes sparkling, lips smiling, her space sickness swamped by the pleasure of the moment. "Next stop a knighthood!" she whispered.

"That'll be the day!" Gorham whispered back, although, in truth, he felt just then that nothing would have been beyond him.

He opened his eyes to find Anna leaning over him. The blue face of Norbu Zang loomed in the background. Anna looked strangely old for an instant, then he realized he was comparing her with the Anna he had seen moments ago, the fresh-faced, thirty-year-old Anna who still had legs below the knee.

He was sweating profusely, yet felt very, very cold. He started into

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his wife's eyes and knew he was so emotionally overwhelmed that his mind was refusing to evaluate the experience.

"Your heart slowed," Anna told him.

It meant nothing. It would have meant nothing even if she'd told him his heart had stopped. He shook his head to clear it and told her, his voice catching, what had happened.

To his profound embarrassment, Anna began to weep. He watched her for a moment, open-mouthed, then sat up and clumsily reached for her. "Please don't, Anna. It's all right. I'm quite all right. Perfectly all right." Her reaction shook him almost as much as the experience itself. He hadn't seen her cry in more than fifteen years.

At least he knew what Qas Nirim meant by life lines. In some mute aftereffect of the crystals, his mind presented him with a picture of his body extending down a fourth dimension. He had length, breadth, height and *duration*. It was not one body, but a line of bodies, infinite in number, each one frozen like a high-speed photograph in some area of hyperspace. At one end of the line was the little body of the moment of his birth. At the other was the cold, emaciated body of the moment of his death. All static. His soul, his ego, was the only thing that moved, flowing along the life line, through body after body, to create the subjective illusion of life, time and action.

The *khorlo* crystals had momentarily reversed the flow, allowing a replay of earlier experiences. He knew with total emotional conviction that there had been no hint of hallucination. He had actually *relived* something that had gone before. The crystals had enabled him to see Anna once again as she had been. At the thought, he caught some inkling of why she had wept. And in much the same instant, he began to realize why Qas Nirim had forbidden the *khorlo* crystals to outworlders.

In their own way, the crystals could be deadly to the structure of the Empire. Unlike the Centima cactus, the drug experience would have little appeal to the young. But the thought of reliving — not remembering, but reliving — past glories at the peak of health and fitness could prove unbearably seductive to the more mature... dammit, why mince words? — to the old It was old men who ran the Empire, old men who ran the service. Old men like himself with a wealth of tolerance and experience. What would happen to the Empire when these men were caught by *khorlo?* As Qas Nirim seemed to

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have realized instantly those years ago, outworlders would have no religious framework to restrain them. The crystals would be taken indiscriminately.

He felt a growing admiration for Qas Nirim's perception and good sense. For the wisdom of the entire Dhak priesthood, in fact, for the rule of secrecy had been made before Nirim reached his present position of authority.

Perhaps the Dhaks had been less worried about the degeneration of the Empire than about the fate of their own culture. They could not guess the whole truth, of course: the hordes of speculators, the research chemists, perhaps eventually the manufacturing plants. But they could possibly sense something of the changes that would follow discovery of the drug. They would know what those changes would mean to the Dhakestri culture, and they would not like it.

Any more, Gorham realized abruptly, than he would like it.

The walled gardens lay beyond the western wing of the administration buildings, sunk in a hollow which guaranteed seclusion. Unlike the jungle folly, they were Gorham's own idea — a collection of tropical and subtropical flora from this planet and from Centima, carefully cultivated and laid out by one of the old Wei Tang philosophers in accordance with the fundamentals of their creed.

Although the intricacies of Wei Tang were well beyond Gorham, he had always found the gardens, with their mineral clusters and odd areas of carefully raked sand, were conducive to a genuine serenity.

But now, for once, the psychological formations of the Wei Tang had lost their magic. Gorham sat on a rude wooden bench, staring out across sand whorls extending almost half an acre, and felt the tremor in his hands. He knew the cause. He was still able to recognize an emotion he thought he had left behind him years ago. He was sitting in his peaceful Wei Tang garden locked in the grip of lust.

Lady Anna joined him in a little while. He watched her approach, hands folded in her lap, with the squat, graceful figure of Norbu Zang pushing the wheelchair. They had a curious relationship, Zang and Anna. Zang was one of the 200 Dhakestri who volunteered annually for service to the outworlder administration — the figure was strictly limited by some obscure religious custom. But while most of the natives completed the statutory year, then returned gratefully to their former occupations, Zang had obtained special dispensation to stay on. From an

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outworlder viewpoint, domestic service was a shocking waste of the man's potential. He was easily as intelligent as any member of Gorham's executive staff, and even though he lacked the technological background of outworlder culture, a little training would have made him a superb administrator. But, as happened with so many things on Kyisi (involuntarily Gorham glanced towards the blanket over Anna's ruined legs) religion stood in the way. Only the monarchy and priesthood were permitted to rule. The rank and file Dhakestri remained true to the skills of their own caste.

Norbu Zang, the serene, graceful, ugly, intelligent Norbu Zang, belonged to the servant caste.

"Are you being antisocial, darling?" Anna asked as they came into earshot.

Gorham smiled wanly. "Just a little."

"Shall we go away?"

He shook his head. "Please don't. I'm not sure company isn't what I need."

Zang guided the wheelchair beside Gorham's bench, locked the wheels then froze into immobility. From experience Gorham knew he could stand for hours like that — a talent developed (or possibly inbred) in many of the natives.

Gorham became aware of Anna's eyes searching his features. "Do you feel like talking about it, darling?" she asked.

He shook his head. How could he explain his longing for a past that was gone forever? Now gone forever! That was the point! The great excitements and the triumphs were no further than a sprinkling of *khorlo* crystals on the tongue! He closed his eyes. It was a ludicrous position for a man of his age and experience. He was shaking like some teen-age addict. The drug might not be habit-forming, but the *experience....*

Gorham shook his head again. There was no way of explaining to his crippled wife that he was lusting for her as she was when they were young. That he was lusting for the sorrows and the triumphs of his youth. That he was reliving the past, not as old men often do, through the gentle haze of memory, but in a new way, with a new, terrifying immediacy. For the past could be his, any of it...all of it!

Anna said nothing for a moment, then looking out across the whorls of sand, remarked, "I wish I could understand Wei Tang — I think it would be so good for my soul."

"I'm sorry," Gorham said. "I'm not trying to cut you out. It's just that..." His voice trailed off. There was no way to convey what he felt.

"It's the drug, isn't it?" Anna asked with insight.

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He nodded. "Yes, my dear. Yes, it is."

A spark of alarm set off in her eyes. "John, it's not — addictive?"

He laid a hand on her arm to reassure her. "No, not —" He was going to say "not physically" but it occurred to him that the real truth might alarm her even more. He shrugged and told her simply, "No, it's not."

She looked far from satisfied, but at least she seemed prepared, for the moment, to let it go at that.

Although Anna could not understand Wei Tang philosophy, she was more than usually susceptible to the curious tranquilizing influence of its calculated botanical arrangements. They had been silent for a long time before Gorham realized she had fallen asleep. He sighed. "Perhaps we'd better go back to the house, Zang."

They walked side by side along the twisting pathways. Even with the movement, Anna failed to wake.

"Excuse me, sir," Norbu Zang said.

Lost in his own thoughts, Gorham murmured absently, "Yes, Zang?"

"One does not question the wisdom of Qas Nirim..."

It took a moment for it to sink in, and when it did, it made no sense. Gorham glanced at the Dhakestri and realized suddenly he was in the throes of some internal battle. "What's wrong, Norbu Zang?"

The liquid eyes turned on him. "Desire holds us to this plane, sir. Only by achieving freedom from desire do we achieve release."

Gorham nodded. It was orthodox enough Dhakestri doctrine. He could not see why Zang had brought it up at that moment, but no doubt his motives would become clear.

"*Khorlo* disciplines help free us from our own desires."

So it was the crystals. Gorham felt no surprise. It was impossible to keep anything from the natives, especially the native servants. He had stopped trying years ago.

"But without the disciplines..." The vaguely dreamy look vanished from Norbu Zang's features. "Sir," he went on crisply, "the outworlder Ronald Saar took chan in the days of priesthood of Grifin Bey."

Saar? The name was faintly familiar. If it was in Grifin Bey's time, that would have put him at least ten years before Gorham arrived on Kyisi. Aloud, he asked, "Chan?"

"A liquid form of the *khorlo* drug, sir."

Gorham waited. He vaguely recollected Ronald Saar might have been one of the early administrative assistants.

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"I learned this from my Teacher," Norbu Zang told him. "Outworlder Saar failed to learn the *khorlo* disciplines. Thus the drug killed him."

Gorham almost stopped in his tracks. "You mean it's lethal?" It was nonsense — he'd had the crystals.

"Outworlder Saar terminated his life line," Zang said.

One did not question the wisdom of the High Priest, who had given Gorham crystals even though he had not undertaken *khorlo* training, but the mind of one outworlder had cracked under the impact of the drug, and he had committed suicide. Norbu Zang was warning him that the crystals could be very dangerous.

Gorham suddenly realized Anna was awake again. Unaccountably, he shivered.

Night sounds drifted through the insect netting on the open window. Beside him, he could hear the deep, even rhythm of Anna's breathing. He envied her the ability to sleep; it had almost deserted him since he realized the full implications of the *khorlo* crystals.

Gorham lay on his back, staring up through darkness towards the ceiling. The familiar nightmare unrolled before his mental eye. An Empire crumbling as its leaders succumbed to the seduction of the crystals...Kyisi ravaged by commercial exploitation...the Dhakestri culture shattered by the unmitigated impact of overwhelming outworlder contact....

He was under no illusions. Young Herrik was a far cry from the long-dead Ronald Saar, who had apparently been content to keep the drug to himself. If Herrik discovered the effect, he would recognize its commercial potential instantly. The boy was fond of money, and the *khorlo* crystals represented money more certainly than a Ling Mor gold mine.

And he was under no illusions that the appeal of the drug might be resisted. After all, he had personally succumbed twice since his initial experiment. The thought brought a nostalgia so potent that he felt a hot welling of tears to his eyes; the crystals, on one of those two occasions, had taken him to relive his wedding night.

Gorham pushed the memories savagely to one side. The time bomb powered by *khorlo* crystals had not yet gone off, but the hands of its clock were ticking towards midnight. He shifted restlessly, then froze for fear of disturbing Anna. He knew that somehow, in payment for all he owed to Kyisi, to the Dhakestri, to the Empire, he had to stop any general exploitation of the crystals. But once the Outer Worlds realized their existence, the

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crystals would inevitably be exploited.

And the nightmare boiled before his mental eye.

Someone coughed. "You sent for me, Sir John?"

Gorham looked up from his desk. "Oh, Malcolm. Hardly heard you coming in." He grinned. "Don't look so sober — it isn't work. Anna and I were wondering if you'd care to have dinner with us tomorrow evening." He paused, not quite long enough to allow Herrik to reply. "And apart from that, to tell the truth, I'd been hoping you'd get here in time to join me in the afternoon refresher." Outside, the sun hung like a giant pearl in a brazen sky. On the veranda, Norbu Zang would be setting out the insulated ice container and the glasses.

Herrik smiled. "That's very kind of you, sir. I'd be delighted — the answer to both questions!"

"Thank God for that," Gorham said. He stood up heavily and fished out a handkerchief to mop his brow. "A little civilized company's about all that makes this heat bearable."

They walked together onto the veranda and took the same seats they had the day Herrik first produced the *khorlo* crystals. It was stage-managed but easily and comfortably stage-managed. Norbu Zang reappeared carrying the bottle.

Staring thoughtfully towards the cultivated jungle, Gorham remarked, "Quite some time since you were out here, Malcolm. Feels like it anyway. I don't think you've been over since you bought those religious crystals."

Herrik nodded. "I believe that was the last time."

"I must be getting old," Gorham said. "I find the days slipping past." *but it was possible to change that now,* an imp inside his mind reminded him. Whatever about the Empire, he was going to find it impossible to stay away from the drug himself. He coughed. "By the way," he said casually, "what ever happened about those things?"

"The crystals?"

"Yes. How did the analysis turn out?"

Was it imagination, or did the question leave Herrik uncomfortable? But he answered without hesitation. "Quite interesting actually — I meant to let you have a report but never quite got round to it. The chemical structure's similar to some of the hallucinogenic synthetics. More or less what you'd expect, considering. I expect it produces the same sort of experience when they use it in the rites."

"But that's an assumption,"

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Gorham said. "Haven't you tried taking some?"

"I really prefer not to risk poisoning myself," Herrik said smiling.

He was lying. Whatever the truth of Nirim's evaluation of his past behavior, there was no doubt he was lying now. Gorham sensed it instantly. But he only said mildly, "If the natives can survive it, I imagine we would."

Herrik gestured vaguely. "You know what I mean, sir." He coughed. "Besides, it may well be addictive."

"Yes, there's that," Gorham agreed. He stared at the ice cubes in his glass, thinking of the power and prestige Herrik could expect from his discovery. There would be a lot of money in the drug if it was handled properly. He looked up suddenly and said, "Forgot to mention it, but I've managed to get hold of some '47 vintage Beaume. We'll be having a bottle or two tomorrow night."

Herrik relaxed visibly. "Something to look forward to, sir."

Gorham had intended to suggest a walk after dinner, but Anna, on some telepathic impulse, made the suggestion before him. Herrik offered to push her wheelchair since temple service had emptied the house of servants, but she declined to accompany them. Gorham felt a twinge of pity; she had been a very active woman once.

It was a balmy evening. The sun had not yet set, but the high heat of the afternoon was gone, leaving a pleasant mildness in the air. They strolled across the lawns and eventually, talking idly of administration affairs, entered the cultivated jungle. On days like this, Gorham found it in him to forgive his first predecessor. The jungle was a folly, but a magnificent folly. With sunlight streaming through the foliage and old Shaw's

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meandering pathways taking them through areas of outstanding floral beauty, the whole thing had a grandeur that could never quite be captured by an artificial work of art — not even, Gorham thought, something as magnificent as the temple.

Their talk died as they walked. The path eventually opened out into a clearing fringed with clumps of yellow-orange flowers.

"Really should bring a few of those things back to Anna," Gorham remarked absently. "Likes to have plants about the house for some reason."

"Let me pick her some," Herrik offered.

"Would you? Don't like to bend too much myself — it makes my back act up sometimes."

He watched as Herrik bent to pick the flowers. He badly wanted to talk about the *khorlo* crystals again, to ask Herrik point-blank if he had taken them. He wanted Herrik to admit his plans, and he wanted to argue Herrik out of them. He wanted to explain to this nice, enthusiastic, intensely ambitious young man what the crystals could do to Kyisi and to the Empire. He wanted to discuss the situation at length, largly to reassure him that his decision was correct. But the nightmare boiled before his mental eye with terrifying urgency so that when Herrik turned his back, Gorham took a spray hypodermic from his pocket, placed it firmly to the side of Herrik's neck and pressed the button. "I'm sorry, Malcolm," he said truthfully.

He left the body where it fell and walked back to the house.

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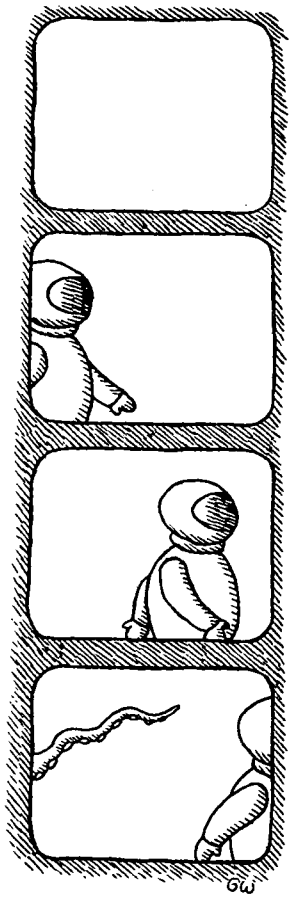
## Strange Bedfellows

I find myself in the odd position this month of talking about a documentary. Considering that the general range of this column is avowedly the various forms of fantasy, one might well wonder how a documentary could possibly worm its way in, but it's that very discrepency which makes it interesting, as opposed to the film itself, which is *Moonwalk One.* It concerns the flight of Apollo 11 — the first landing, if you, like me, can't keep the numbers straight — and it's interesting enough, I guess. But in thinking about reviewing it here, it brought to mind the strange position we s-f fans find ourselves in these days, particularly the pre-sputnik age group. I first became aware of this about three years ago when I was all set to review a film called "Marooned" (re astronauts in trouble; and suddenly realized that it was not science fiction. (Personally I was just as happy not to have to see it; it sounded dreadful, and did indeed turn out to be when I caught it on TV recently.) But now for the first time a major tenet of science fiction has become reality, and I, for one, am having to readjust.

It really boils down to what the individual's reasons for becoming

BAIRD SEARLES

# Films



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involved with sf in the first place are. Is it (to use the example to hand) simply the idea of a trip to the moon, *or* is it the many possibilities inherent in a trip to the moon? The thing itself has happened, and turned out to be the lowest common denominator of dull — all rocks and flag waving. The many possibilities have vanished, and so has my interest. But for those whose interest was the very fact of a moon flight, it is there, and though generalized fiction has become specific fact, their concern remains. It is this sort of s-f buff who will enjoy *Moonwalk One;* it is a nearly put together documentary of about an hour in length concerning the factors that go into a moon flight (like the little ladies who sew the astronauts' gloves), footage from the flight and the landing, and, in a way the most interesting, the thousands of tourists who gathered at the Cape to watch an event that they did not fully understand, but knew somehow was important. The film was not made by NASA, but with NASA cooperation, and it was good to see the visuals from the Moon larger and clearer than one's TV set delivered them. There were two visually stunning moments: one shot, taken from *underneath* the launch at lift-off, was hair raising; the other, from the capsule as it landed in the Pacific, looking straight up into the colored parachutes weaving and shifting with the wind and the motion of the vehicle, was a perfect contrast to the fire and fury of the first.

Curiously enough, there is another documentary to be mentioned, in concept more suitable for this column because it was truly speculative in nature. Called *In Search of Ancient Astronauts,* it is a made-for-TV visualization of Erich Van Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods,* which concerns the possibility of extraterrestrial contact in ancient times as shown by "proofs" in the artifacts of various cultures. The show was a nice travelogue, and the theory is certainly one I would not automatically discount, but the narration was such a mine of factual misinformation ("Teotihuacan was the center of the Aztec civilization." "Salisbury plain lies at the Wales border.") of the most blatant idiocy that it reduced the whole thing to the lowest level of flying saucer nuttery. All this was delivered with great portentousness by Mr. Pop Sci-Fi himself, Rod Serling, accompanied by what sounded like music from an old Bette Davis melodrama. If it reruns, I suggest watching with the sound off.

Since this month we seem to be dwelling on things generally

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removed from what we usually cover, we might as well mention a record. RCA has just re-released David Bowie's album *Space Oddity*. Bowie is, of course, the hottest rock artist around, and the title song of the album is the best of the many sf oriented rock pieces that have been recorded. It bears an odd resemblance to K.M. O'Donnell's short story, "Still-Life," from *Again, Dangerous Visions*, concerning as it does an astronaut who defects from authority in midflight. Musically, it's a mini-tone poem, beautifully but not banally reflecting the staccato monotone of mission control's instructions, lift off, and the astronaut's stoned, ecstatic response to space, which is one of the most movingly lyrical song phrases I've ever heard.

Literary department....From Saturday Review Press, *Cinema of the Fantastic*. Fifteen major films in the genre, from Melies' "A Trip to the Moon" to "Forbidden Planet," are each given a chapter which is in essence a history of that particular film. Much good information (I especially welcomed the chapters on "Things to Come," "The Thief of Bagdad," and "Beauty and the Beast," all favorites) and many wonderful photos.

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Few writers have a better touch with the very short story than Edward Wellen. This one concerns a peculiar relationship between men and androids, and it is, oh, so deceptively quiet...

# Androids Don't Cry

## by EDWARD WELLEN

The man was just drifting into the rainbow at the end of his pot when the shadow of an android passed over him. The man raised up on an elbow, muttered, "A stinking andy," and sank back into his reefer dream.

The android strode on, keeping wider of the dirty walls. Rounding that corner, he had nearly trod on the man. The android shook his perfect head. Poor guy. Poor all of them. He moved along, taking the turns on the map in his mind. He ignored the way the men avoided his eyes and spat behind his back.

He had forgotten there were so many jobless, shiftless men back home on Earth. What helped you forget was that you didn't run into them outside their part of town. Besides, he had been away a long time. Even to an android ten years was a long time.

The android stopped at a door at the end of an alley. He stood still a long moment. The great chest swelled. The powerful fist knocked lightly but firmly.

"Coming."

Slow footsteps. The door creaked open on a gaunt woman. Her hand blurred to her throat.

The android stared at her.

She brushed a jiggle of gray hair back with trembling fingers.

"Yes?"

"You're . . . Mrs. Dan Boesman? Mae Boesman?"

She nodded, grew aware of eyes at windows, stepped back indoors.

"Won't you come in?"

"Thank you."

His eyes adjusted quickly to the dimness and picked out the wedding picture on the table. She



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swiftly rubbed the plastic with her forearm and shyly handed the picture to the android.

"Yes, that's my Dan. He was just what you see — a kind and loving man. Yet that doesn't mean he was soft. But then you knew him, didn't you?"

"I knew him."

"I guessed that. Then you know he was determined to do his best for his family, no matter what. That's why he did the crazy thing he did."

The android handed the picture back. Android vocabulary had little provision for small talk.

"It's a . . . nice picture."

"Thank you." She clasped it against her breast and lowered her head. "It's all that's left of him."

She put it down hurriedly and turned as a teen-ager burst in yelling.

"Timmy said he saw an andy—"

The boy brought himself up short on seeing the android.

Mae Boesman reddened.

"I apologize for my son. He really knows better than to use that term."

The android forced a smile.

"That's all right. I've heard worse."

"Even so. And a friend of his father's. Oh, I'm keeping you standing. Please sit down and tell me why you've come."

While the boy fidgeted, the android sat down carefully on the strongest chair.

"You knew my father? You were there? Tell me how it happened."

The boy leaned on the table and cupped his chin to drink in the android's words. Mae Boesman had seated herself across from the android. The android saw that she too wanted to know, too much to chide the boy. The best way was to give it to them straight, as far as he could.

"You know that he got himself up to look as much like an *andy*" — he shot a glance at the boy, who looked down — "as possible. He bluffed his way into the hiring hall. He fooled everyone so well that he was able to sign up and ship out. Of course, the real androids quickly caught on he wasn't one of them."

The android thought back and laughed. He saw the expression on the faces of the wife and the kid.

"Well, it *was* funny, the way he strained his guts and limbs to keep up with them and turn out a fair day's work. And in amusement and pity the androids covered for him as long as they could. But it had to happen. The foreman found him out and lasered a report to the home office. The company moved to void the contract and threatened to prosecute him for fraud if he didn't refund the advance he had turned over to you."

Mae Boesman's voice was a

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whisper. "I never knew that."

"It never came to that. The androids staged a wildcat strike. The company backed down gracefully — and quietly ordered the foreman to work Dan to death."

Mae Boesman covered her mouth.

The android smiled.

"Wouldn't even have to work him to death. He was getting thinner and weaker on android rations. So there he was, out in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. Son, I guess you know what the job was: to sweep the asteroids into one heap, to recompact them into one big ball, another Earthlike planet for us — for man — to colonize right here in the solar system. And we did it. If you look up at the right time, there she shines — Jumart, the new evening star."

The kid's eyes were stars.

"Dangerous work, huh?"

The android grinned.

"I guess you could say that, Johnny. As the mass accreted and compacted, it increased in gravitational pull. The sweeping went faster and faster and grew trickier and trickier as the snowballing planet drew chunks and particles from all points. It was one big log jam, all right. Though of course the peaveying was not to break up the jam but to make it bigger. Anyway, you didn't want to get trapped between 'logs'." The android grew grave. "That's what happened to your dad, Johnny. He didn't get out of the way fast enough."

Mae Boesman shivered. A whisper escaped her.

"Crushed."

She got up and put her hands on the boy's shoulders and pulled her to him.

The android nodded.

"It was bad. Very bad. They found very little of him."

She put her hands to her ears.

"Stop!"

"I'm sorry."

"No. It's terrible, but I'm glad to know at last how it truly was. The company never really told us anything. So cold, so impersonal."

The android laughed.

"The company. Oh, yes, we know the company." The android rose to get at a pocket. He handed her a credit order. "Take this. It's a bonus Dan had coming to him. That's why I'm here."

She took in the figure. Her eyes opened like time-lapse flowers.

"That much! But how —"

"Don't worry about how we got the company to fork over. All of it is legally yours."

"I can't believe it. Now Johnny can —" She broke off and down.

The android looked uncomfortable.

"And there may be more. Insurance money."

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"But the company said —"

"I know. That he was ineligible. But we're working on it. And we're a strong union."

"I don't know what to say."

The android smiled.

"In that case, silence is best."

She seemed out of breath.

"Can I get you anything? I don't know what you . . . I mean, if there's anything you'd like . . ."

"Nothing, thank you. I have to be going anyway."

"Must you?"

But she seemed relieved.

"I must. There's always another big job to work on: out there. 'Cosmeticize the cosmos' — that's our motto."

"Well, if you must. But thank you for coming. And for . . . everything."

"Not at all."

The woman and child made another nice picture standing in the doorway, but the android did not look back. Not even when he heard them whisper.

"How'd it know my name?"

"Your father must've talked about us, I guess."

"Oh."

The android stepped into the tingle-jingle music that vibrated android flesh pleasurably and bellied up against the bar for a shot of brainwash. He looked around. A hangout like all spaceport hangouts, peopling itself with the sweepings — or vacuumings — of the solar system. He spotted his friends in a booth and joined them.

"How was it, Dan, seeing the wife and kid again?"

The other android friend kicked the first android friend hard enough to dent the shin plate. But Dan Boesman didn't notice the byplay, even appeared not to have heard the question. Then he shook himself out of a trance of remembrance.

He looked at his friends fondly. After all, they and the other androids had saved his life, had chipped in to buy him the prosthetic devices, the spare parts that made him one of them. He tossed off the drink.

"Oh, it was all right." He signaled for another drink and leaned forward. "Tell us, what did you hear at the hiring hall? Where do we go from here?"

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Russell Bates is 31, a full-blood Kiowa Amerindian, currently a student at the University of Oklahoma. He writes: "I spent four years in the Air Force and was injured in a duty accident. In the course of a long hospitalization, a neglected hobby was encouraged as therapy: writing. I have sold many short stories, a couple of children's books. There is a world of experience and culture that is exclusively Amerindian that has never been told. That I have set out to try to relate what I can of this world is audacious, perhaps. But there was simply no way I could have done otherwise, even if I had consciously tried."

# Rite of Encounter

## by RUSSELL BATES

In the third week of his fasting, Singing-owl found the white men.

The young Kiowa awakened that morning to lilting daybreak calls of birds. Rain had fallen in the night; his buffalo robe was soaked and smelly; his buckskin shirt and leggings were clammy wet. He was miserable. A chill wind blew in under the overhanging rocks. Singing-owl shivered, almost forgetting the receding hunger pangs. Almost . . .

At last the sun warmed the rocks around him. Singing-owl sat up wearily, hoping that this new day would finally bring him the vision. He dried his long black hair and braided it loosely on the left side. Then he stared for a long while downward from the rocky cleft. The hillside was unchanging: scattered clumps of scrub oaks, moss-grown boulders, thick yellow-green grass and black soil. Hillsides beyond bore the same colors and shapes.

Singing-owl had dreamed sometime before dawn. Of deer and clouds and fishes and snow . . . But the dream had not been the vision he was seeking. When that came, he would speak with spirits and come away with pieces of their



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wisdom. The wisdom, in songs and chants and riddles, would be his power as a warrior and as a man.

At least that was what the medicine man promised to him. But how much longer did he have to wait? The moon had been just past full when Singing-owl started his fast; soon, it would be full once again.

Singing-owl thought of the medicine man who slept warm at the camp and had no want of food or clothing.

That toothless, half-blind old man! I hope he got bloated on the meat I gave him!

The hunger pangs increased at the mention of food. Singing-owl leaned over and pulled a small deerskin parcel from a crack in the rocks. Wrapped inside was a handful of pounded dried meat mixed with suet. He smelled it for a long time, then closed his eyes and tried to swallow. He put the meat away again, feeling very guilty.

At length he forced himself to leave the cleft. When he stood, dizziness and nausea made him stagger. He leaned back against the rocks, momentarily unable to see. His arms and legs tingled and a cramp twisted the muscles in his side. Then the white sparkles faded from before his eyes.

Water. Must get water.

Singing-owl made his way carefully down the hill; the going was harder than the day before. He could no longer jump from boulder to boulder and instead squeezed between them. Sharp rocks hurt his feet through wet moccasins.

The slope leveled off, and Singing-owl sat on the ground to catch his breath. He glanced up the hill; it didn't seem any higher than he remembered. But now he regretted having passed by other, more gentle slopes.

I chose my suffering spot well. But will I be able to climb it again?

He followed a deer trail and walked listlessly among the trees. Twice he stumbled over tree roots. Another time he brushed against a tree and grabbed it desperately to keep from falling. He stopped and looked around.

Is this the right trail to the river? It's so long. I'm lost!

Singing-owl left the trail and headed away across the clearing. The thick grass slowed him to a stumbling pace. Then he smelled water and knew the river was close.

When he reached its muddy bank, he fell to his knees and threw himself forward to drink. The river was cool and slightly muddied. But the water made him feel better. He washed his face, then stripped off his buckskins to wash the many bruised cuts on his arms, chest and back. His frenzied thrashing against the rocks the evening before had gained him nothing but

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exhausted sleep; the self-tortures had not made him worthy of the vision. At last, Singing-owl slipped into the water and washed himself vigorously. Some of the fatigue, muscle aches, and lightheadedness flowed away with the sandy mud he used for scrubbing.

Then he lay against a log at the water's edge; the river current soothed his body. It was a struggle to stay awake.

A dog barked. Singing-owl sat up and listened. Again. Close by. Upstream.

He crawled out of the water, grabbed his buckskins, and listened again. The barking broke into howls. He scrambled up the bank into bushes and made his way toward the sound, at once curious and afraid.

In this isolated land, no other tribes roamed. A dog meant white men.

Singing-owl paused to put on his buckskins. Then he crept ahead through the bushes: cautious, patient, silent. A few moments later, he reached the edge of a clearing and could see the camp, the dog, and the white men.

The dog was tied to a tree. One white man lay beside a long-dead fire. Another sat against a tree, his arms limp, his head fallen forward to his chest. A third lay sprawled on the riverbank, his head and one arm in the water. All were dressed in dirty gray and brown clothes, with boots scuffed and mud-caked.

A breeze fluttered the leaves of cottonwoods around the clearing; it also brought Singing-owl a whiff of decay. The men were dead.

The dog sensed Singing-owl and barked louder, leaping to the limit of the rope. Singing-owl stood up slowly, then walked into the camp. The dog retreated a little but kept up its barking. Singing-owl noticed a broken rope between two trees; horses had long since pulled free and wandered off.

He stopped at the body lying beside the ashes. The dead man lay face-down, a blanket across his legs. Singing-owl bent down, picked up a fine pistol; it was fully loaded, with light, circular tracings along the barrel. Perhaps there were other weapons.

Singing-owl turned to the dog. It was brown and white spotted; its fur was matted and the mouth was dirty. Starving and dying of thirst, it had been eating mud.

Singing-owl put the gun in his shirt and hunted through the men's packs. He found hardtack biscuits and dried meat. He also found metal cans but discarded them because their markings were meaningless. He looked with longing at the food. But another nudge of guilt made him throw it to the dog.

It sniffed the morsels suspi-

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ciously, then began to eat in great gulps.

Singing-owl sighed, then picked up a small pot to get water. He shivered as he passed the man by the tree. At the riverbank he noticed something strange as he bent to fill the pot. The dead man lying there was covered with sores.

He looked closer. The hand that lay out of the water was almost raw; crusted yellow ooze edged what little skin remained on its back. He looked at the face. The sores there had ragged white strings that waved in the flowing water. Singing-owl filled the pot quickly and stepped away.

The dog drank the water and wagged its tail. Then it looked up at him, expectant. Singing-owl reached out carefully, untied the rope. The dog brushed against him, happy.

"What killed your people, dog?" Singing-owl said, not truly breaking the ban against speaking to anyone.

The dog shook its head and barked. Its tail slapped against Singing-owl's legs.

"That was a bad way to meet death. Maybe I'd better not stay here any longer." He skirted wide of the man sitting at the tree. Yes, the sores were there. He didn't bother turning over the man under the blanket.

Singing-owl rememberd the pistol; he took it out with a trembling hand and dropped it. The dog walked with him away from the camp, then stopped.

Singing-owl looked back. "Going to stay here, yes? I wouldn't be able to keep you anyway. Hope you find something to eat . . ." He brushed away the obvious and horrible thought, heading back into the hills.

When evening came, Singing-owl made a small fire and began his chanting prayers. The wind blew warm over the rocky cleft; stars were glistening in the dying film of twilight. Surely the strange events of the day were signs that the vision was coming. The robes that hid things to come would be lifted and...

Singing-owl found himself repeating the words of the medicine man and was disgusted. He waited. Nothing. The air turned cool and the fire slowly fell away.

Where is it? The medicine man is a liar! But what of all the other warriors who claim power from a vision?

He sat quietly, then decided to fast for only a few more days. If no vision came, he would go back to the Kiowas. He'd have to tell them something; exactly what, he did not know.

But he would repay the medicine man for many days of

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discomfort. Singing-owl's brow wrinkled as he half frowned, half smiled. His reputation for playing pranks and outwitting his tribesmen was to gain yet another discinction. He would do nothing harmful, to be sure, just a few tricks to upset the old man. Such as: giving him skunk bones if he asked for weasel, hawk meat if he asked for prairie bird, or putting green sticks in his firewood. Singing-owl wanted to laugh, but he couldn't.

He noticed the fire and started to add more wood. But he felt warm enough; in fact, he felt almost too warm. He touched his face: hot.

Perhaps I'm tired. All right. I am tired.

He lay down to sleep. He remembered the white men and their sores, though he really didn't want to. Something had killed them. Quickly. Quietly. He tried to think of other things. The vision. The many tricks he had played. Gray Bear's daughters. A running hunt through trees after a deer.

But nothing forced the image of the dead men from the edge of his sight. Finally, he fell asleep, feeling warmer than before.

Singing-owl opened his eyes. The sun was high above the hills. He lay quietly and listened to his body. All was well, apparently. Relieved, he sat up, yawned and stretched. He pushed the buffalo robe away and started to get up.

The thing sat a short distance away, watching him. Singing-owl stared, unable to move further. It was shaped like a man. But it wasn't a man.

It was a mass of raw flesh. With a body, and arms and legs, and a head. No skin or hair; just endless running sores. It appeared to be looking at him, but its face was featureless, red, open flesh. Yellow fluids trickled from over its entire body; wet streams ran down the rock on which it sat.

Singing-owl crawled backward, pressed himself against the rocks, eyes wide.

A ghost? Is it a white man's ghost? Or is . . . is that the vision?

He choked on the words: "Are you one of the spirits? Have . . . have you come because I am worthy?"

It moved, raised an arm, touched its chest. In a thick watery voice, it said, "I am Black Smallpox. And I wish to walk with you."

Singing-owl almost fainted. He stared at it, tried to speak.

But the creature spoke first. "Do not be afraid. I will not harm you. I only wish to go with you to the Kiowas." It stood, and the yellow streams ran down its legs. "Yes, we will walk together to your people."

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Singing-owl thought quickly, blinking. It surely was not the vision. Or was it perhaps the vision after all, somehow spoiled by white man's evil? Yes, the white men. Their sores. *Death.*

"No!" he said, feeling for a loose rock. "You came with the white men! You killed them! And now you want to kill . . ." He found a rock and threw it. Smallpox wavered like a reflection in water, then suddenly was standing a short distance further away. The rock clattered harmlessly to the ground.

Smallpox stepped closer. "Come. Let us go."

Singing-owl sprang away suddenly and clambered down the hillside. He ran, stumbled, fell, crawled, slid over boulders, ran again. When he reached flatter ground, he broke into a run and didn't look back. He staggered and almost tripped several times. He ran past trees, over hills, down gullies, into grass and bare ground.

At last he ran, stumbled, ran into a narrow valley. He fell, gasping and crying. He landed on his face and hands at the edge of a rain water pool. He lay beside a boulder and a small bush. He tried to crawl, but fell back. His body shook and shivered, though sweat coated him. Then his breathing slowed and he raised himself on one arm.

Singing-owl heard wailing and moaning, but very faint. Then he saw people reflected in the pool. They were Kiowas; ragged, wet sores covered their arms and faces. The wailing reflections reached for him, crying louder.

Singing-owl jerked himself backward and pushed dirt into the pool with his feet. Something stood at the limit of his side vision; he turned and saw Smallpox standing beside the bush.

It stepped toward him. "Why did you stop? We are going to the Kiowas, are we not? The sooner we get there, the better it will please me."

Singing-owl scrambled up, backed away in a low crouch. "No! I won't take you! You have no place here! Go away!"

It raised a hand. "We must go. The day grows long."

Singing-owl turned and ran again.

He climbed a cliff. Smallpox walked to the edge above him before he reached the top.

He ran over the plateau and dove from more than treetop height into a lake. Smallpox stood atop the beaver lodge when Singing-owl swam toward the dam.

He hid in a box canyon. Smallpox was standing behind him near the sheer rock face. Singing-owl quickly set a grass fire by striking stones together. The flames

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swept into the canyon, swirling with smoke, trapping Smallpox. But when Singing-owl ran into a forest, Smallpox stepped from behind a tree to meet him.

Through the rest of the day Singing-owl ran, set traps, ran again. But he could neither outrun nor outwit Smallpox; it was always there when he stopped. Night fell and Singing-owl found he could run no more.

He sat on the top of a grassy hill and watched as Smallpox walked slowly toward him. Light from a nearby full moon flashed in white sparks from the dripping liquids.

I have lost. I have no more tricks. Yet . . .

Singing-owl thought hurriedly, formed a plan, then hung his head as Smallpox stopped beside him. "All right," he said. "We will go to the Kiowas."

Somewhere, Singing-owl felt a flicker of hope.

The lodges were quiet; moonlight revealed a score or more of them built at the base of a tree-lined hill. The main campfire was low. Camp dogs roamed in the spaces between the lodges. Sentries stood unmoving at long intervals around the village.

At a distance, Singing-owl circled the camp quietly. Smallpox walked with him.

At the far end of the camp, a woman came out of a lodge and threw bones on the ground. The dogs ran toward her and began fighting over the meal.

Singing-owl saw his chance and boldly walked in among the lodges where there was no sentry. Then he stopped and abruptly turned to Smallpox. "We are here. Now will you let me go? I am ashamed."

It stepped forward and regarded the circle of lodges. "Not just yet. There is still something you must do. Come."

He followed it, glancing from side to side, nervous. Smallpox led him to a large deerskin bag that was supported by crossed poles.

"This water," it said, standing very close to him and pointing. "Spit into in."

Singing-owl only stared, not understanding.

"I said, spit into this water."

He stepped to the bag, opened a flap near the top, and spat.

"Again. That will do it. You are free."

Singing-owl moved back. "Free?"

Smallpox turned away. "Your usefulness is at an end." It sat down, still with its back to him; the open flesh gleamed wetly in the moonlight. "You will not understand, but I will tell you anyway. There are but a few I cannot kill. You are one. But I still lived inside you and thus was my purpose

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served. Leave me."

Singing-owl pretended to walk toward a lodge near large shade trees. "Yes," he said, looking back. "I must go to my lodge. My family will be glad to see me."

But when Smallpox was no longer in sight, Singing-owl ran for the trees. Two dogs ran after him, barking. A sentry shouted and more dogs ran after him. Singing-owl reached the shadows and ran out of the camp. He lost his pursuers quickly.

I'm free. I'm free! And the Pawnees are no friends to the Kiowas! They deserve Smallpox!

Dawn found Singing-owl far away from the Pawnee camp. When he was sure no one followed, he trapped a rabbit and ate his first meal in twenty days. His stomach ached a little when he set out again. But he was still happy at finally outwitting Smallpox.

He laughed. What a tale he would tell of his vision when he reached the Kiowas!

He was almost there when he heard wailing. He stopped and looked around frantically. Nothing else could be seen on the rolling plains except grasses moving in the wind. Then the wailing faded to be replaced by a laughing-taunt. It was the voice of Smallpox.

"Where are you?" Singing-owl said, turning in circles. "You cannot be here! I outwitted you!"

"I told you, but you did not understand. We still walk together. I am a part of you. I will be with you always. You cannot get rid of me!" And the laughing began again.

Then Singing-owl knew the laughing came from inside him. He clutched at himself, tore at his own flesh, and screamed.

The laugh rolled on, unstopping.

The cleft of rocks offered little protection from the raging thunderstorm. Singing-owl huddled under his buffalo robe and watched the storm. Lightning split trees on far hills and flashed the night away for brief moments. Thunder snapped down from the clouds and shook the ground. Rain splashed on Singing-owl's face and ran in pools under him.

He prayed, asked the mercy of the spirits. Small things came back to him: a boy's game with a willow hoop; his mother and stories and songs and gentle scoldings; the self-tortures that had declared him a man; the smiling, teasing daughter of Gray Bear; how fat quail sizzled when roasted...

For days, Singing-owl had considered exile or suicide. But he knew the one would be spent in

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temptation to see loved ones again. And there was no honor in the other.

Now Smallpox was to be finally outwitted. Singing-owl was fasting once more. But this time the fasting would go on, until there was nothing left.

He smiled faintly and pulled the buffalo robe tighter around him. At least, he thought, the laughing has stopped.

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## The Second Short Shortest Fantasy Ever Ever Published

Ferrara lifted the gun to his temple, preparing suicide. "At last there will be an end to this," he murmured, "I can't stand it any more, this guilt and always *reliving*.."

He was referring once again to the fact that unknown to authorities he had been responsible for the death of his mother through slow poison some twelve years before; since then, more and more he had found himself reliving the moment of her death, the struggles on the bed, the curses, the strange, cunning smile of relaxation with which she had fixed him as she died. The images had assaulted the frame of his consciousness; he saw them over and again,

"Enough," Ferrara said, "enough of this," knowing that at least the one moment of his mother's death, frozen in time, would now be taken from him, and he pulled the trigger.

The bullet bullet lodged deep deep in his brain he pulled pulled the trigger the bullet lodged lodged deep in his brain brain he he pulled pulled the trigger trigger the bullet

—Barry N. Malzberg

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Here's a short and entertaining piece that carries the Aliens Are Among Us theme one twist further than usual.

# Family Album

## by MICHAEL GOLDBERG and LAURENCE M. JANIFER

Charley is a photo bug, and photo bugs aren't quite like the rest of us: they're nuts in a slightly different way. Lots of people take pictures, with everything from a Land camera or an Instamatic to Nikons and Graflexes and other such manias, but not quite so many go in for developing and printing their own shots, and of those who do a lot just put in the basic apparatus and work with that, saving a little money on commercial developing in the long run and having themselves a small harmless hobby.

But Charley is a photo bug. The basic equipment is there, all right, but it isn't the end or even a very large part of the beginning: Charley's basement is crammed with tubes and trays and agitators and lights, filter systems and revolving drums and box on box of lenses, eight different kinds of print paper and an assortment of bottles that would do credit to your neighborhood bar. In fact, there used to be a bar in Charley's basement once, but the sink and shelves and cabinets have long since been taken over by his photo supplies; and the bottles on those shelves contain Dektol and fixer and shortstop and Microdol and all the rest of the list of poisonous photographic chemicals, instead of a little Scotch or Irish or even vodka, for God's sake.

In fact, I know nothing on earth that looks so much like Doctor Frankenstein's Private Laboratory as Charley's basement does. He hasn't got anything that goes *zzzap* and jumps a nice dramatic spark gap, but if the film companies



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ever invent something like that that's any use to photo labs whatever, it'll be sitting in Charley's basement the next time I go on down there.

If there is a next time. I don't know, maybe all of this should have been in the past tense. Because, you see, Charley's Uncle George and his Aunt Margaret came over to visit the other afternoon.

I happened to be there, just sitting around drinking some of Charley's beer (he keeps that in a refrigerator upstairs, in the kitchen, where his photo stuff hasn't yet taken over, thank God) and goofing off, and looking forward, more or less, to a session helping Charley in the basement later. I don't now much about photography, but I don't have to, to grab a print with tongs and agitate it in a stop bath or help hang a newly developed roll of negatives out to dry or just admire the latest prints, portraits, "studies," or whatever is piled up. Charley's a good guy, his place is quiet, and his beer is cold, and I've gone in for a lot stranger and more demanding hobbies in my time.

The doorbell rang in the middle of Charley's second beer and my first, while we were discussing some strike that the unions had called recently and that the Staten Island *Advance*, which is Charley's hometown paper, was screaming about all over the kitchen table. Charley was just getting around to the usual switch of topics by saying something about the photo coverage of the picket lines when he had to pack it in and answer the door. He sounded so happy about whoever he'd found on the doorstep that I ambled out with my beer in my hand to take a look.

Uncle George was a fifties-looking man, maybe five ten, big and florid with a small thatch of grey hair on his head and a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles on his nose, and he looked happy-but-dignified. Aunt Margaret was somewhere in her fifties, too, with a thin beak of a nose and a fuzzy resemblance to Margaret Hamilton — you know, the Wicked Witch of the West. She was smiling fit to crack her face open, and Charley was telling them the routine about how long it had been since he's seen them.

"Well, we were in the neighborhood," Uncle George boomed, and we thought we'd drop over and see what our favorite nephew was up to. Eh?" He made the *we* sound just a bit royal, and he looked pretty stuffed and aloof in spite of his smile. Later on, I found out that he was an assistant principal in a school somewhere in New Jersey.

"We just wanted to say hello, dear," Aunt Margaret was saying,

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and Charley was saying "Come in, come in," and doing the introductions, and within ten minutes Uncle George had a beer of his own, and Aunt Margaret had a ginger ale Charley had found in the back of the refrigerator, and we had gone through most of the business about, oh, you're a writer, and what is it you write? and if you want to hear a real story, something you could write down and we'd split the money . . . and so on. I was on my third beer (the sort of thing people do when they find out you're a writer is a strain, and I was a little ahead of my drinking for the day), Charley was just pouring his, and the kitchen, where we were all sitting, had begun to get as relaxed as it was going to get with an assistant principal stuck in the middle of it.

Someplace around there, Charley said, "You know, it must be a year since I've seen you," and Aunt Margaret said, "All of that, dear," in her feathery little voice, and Uncle George nodded heavily, and then Charley snapped his fingers. "I want some new pictures of you," he told them.

Well, Aunt Margaret was convinced that she took terrible pictures, and Uncle George wasn't at all sure about the whole thing, and of course it ended with Charley using the last half of a roll on the two of them, with one shot of me thrown in because Charley wanted to finish the roll. And then Charley gave me the signal that meant *keep them amused* or something and disappeared into the basement. I understood: he wanted to have the film developed and at least one print ready for Uncle George and Aunt Margaret before they left. It would take some speedy work and some special equipment, but those were Charley's long suits, and he wanted to show off. *I can do anything a Land camera can do* — that sort of thing.

What it meant was that I was stuck with Charley's Aunt and Uncle for a little over an hour and began creeping up a new daytime record with seven beers, while down in the basement Charley and his apparatus clanked and churned and fumbled and agitated and blew hot air. It took about that long to get the film itself developed and dried for prints, and I expected to spend more time yet while Charley got some prints, but I heard his voice bubbling up from downstairs, not very clearly, saying something like, "Hey, help, hey," and sounding a little panicked. So I said. "Excuse me," and put my beer down — you don't drink in a photo lab because if you mix up the various liquids it will be the last mistake you ever make — and picked my way down the stairs, not staggering too much at that.

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Charley was dimly visible at the far end of the basement, where the enlarger was, waving a strip of negatives in the dim orange safelight. I started to ask him what was wrong, but he said, in a new and very hoarse voice, "Come over here and look at this, I don't like it at all."

So I went over and looked. I didn't like it much either. The first half of Charley's roll had been a series of flower studies he was doing for some photo magazine contest. The last half consisted of one picture of me, pretty lousy as far as I could tell from the negative, and nine pictures of monsters.

I mean *monsters*. Three eyes, tentacles, lumpy skin with little ugly patches of rank hair scattered throughout, above seven and a half feet high...I was glad that it had been a black-and-white roll. I didn't want to see what those things looked like in color.

They were sitting naked in Charley's kitchen. One of them was holding a beer, and the other one was holding a glass of ginger ale.

After I had studied the nagatives for a long time, I told Charley, "I don't believe it."

"I do," Charley said in a tense voice. Charley reads science fiction, which is a nice arrangement, since I write it. "That's what my aunt and uncle really are. They can hypnotize people, but they can't hypnotize a camera."

"Now, wait a minute," I said. "You can't have an aunt and an uncle who are alien monsters."

"I know," Charley said impatiently. "A year ago — I have pictures — they were Uncle George and Aunt Margaret. But aliens have got rid of the real human beings, I suppose — just *got rid of them* — and taken their places. It's a plot to conquer the world."

Science fiction readers are very fast with plots to conquer the world. I've never been so sure about such things myself, partly, I suppose, because it's hard for me to imagine any reason for anybody to bother. All the same, Charley's notion sounded plausible, but it had a hole in it large enough to fling his best enlarger through.

"If that's what's happened," I said, "then how come they let you take their picture? That sounds like the first thing they'd avoid."

"Maybe they wouldn't know . . . no," Charley said. "If they can hypnotize people all that well, they know enough to know what hypnosis *won't* work on."

"Sure," I said. "So they can't be alien monsters. Something went wrong with the film."

Charley looked at me. "I would love to invent something that would go wrong with film in such a way as to leave my kitchen, a glass of beer and a glass of ginger ale — and a

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picture of you — and replace two people with alien monsters."

We must have stood there staring at the negatives for half an hour. We made a few prints, and the monsters looked every bit as bad as I thought they were going to. I kept thinking of who, or what, was in Charley's kitchen, alone up there, but we didn't hear a sound, and I couldn't think of a sensible thing to do, whatever was going on.

Then Charley said, "I've got an idea," and put the negative strip carefully down on the enlarger easel and headed for the stairs. I took a deep breath and went after him. An idea was more than I had, and we were going to have to leave that nice safe basement sooner or later.

Uncle George and Aunt Margaret were sitting quietly at the kitchen table, just as we'd left them. Their glasses were empty, that was the only change.

Uncle George started to say something, but Charley cut in, instantly:

"I'm afraid something's gone wrong with your pictures," he said. "*Terribly* wrong."

"Oh, what a shame," Aunt Margaret said.

"Perhaps it's the lighting," Uncle George said, and began to tell us about the troubles he had had arranging for photographs for his school's yearbook six years before.

Charley got rid of the two of them in fifteen minutes, quietly and politely, and, after he had shut the door on their smiles and good wishes and let's get-together-soon-again and so forth, he walked back to the kitchen with me and opened two more beers.

"They didn't react," he said. "They didn't react at all."

I nodded. "You see?" I said. "They can't be alien monsters. If they were they'd have tried to get the film, or find out what it was you called 'wrong,' or something like that. So..."

"So?" Charley said.

I took a long pull on my new beer. "So I don't know," I said. "It's something out of Charles Fort or somebody. It hasn't *got* an explanation."

Charley looked at me, digusted. "And you *write* the stuff," he said. "Of course it has an explanation." And he told me about it. And after I'd agreed that it was the only explanation that did fit all the facts, we dreamed up one more test.

An hour or so after that, I left.

Charley owns a timer for his camera rig, of course — he owns about all the equipment there is. And though he doesn't usually bother with it, he was going to try his test with the timer.

What he'd come up with was

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one more question: Suppose these aliens don't know themselves that they're aliens? Suppose they've been hypnotized themselves in some way, to believe that they're human beings, until there are enough of them on Earth and there can be a mass lifting of the hypnosis, with a key word or something like that, and they throw off their disguises and take over the world?

It would explain Aunt Margaret and Uncle George.

And, since we have proof on the same roll that *I'm* not an alien, there was only one more test. To check things out — and see how far things have gone, too.

It's been two weeks, but Charley hasn't yet got up the courage to use that timer and take a picture of himself.

ABOUT THE COVER: The fantastic binary Zeta Aurigae casts bi-colored shadows on the surface of a hypothetical planet 700 million miles from the red supergiant in this painting by David Hardy. The red star is some 245 times as big as our Sun, while its companion is 3½ times as large and 100 times as bright; they take nearly three years to revolve around their common center of gravity, and in the picture the blue component is about to be eclipsed — its light beginning to be dimmed by the enormous though tenuous interlacing network of prominences and gaseous envelope surrounding the supergiant. (From *Challenge of the Stars* by David A. Hardy and Patrick Moore, Rand McNally 1972.)

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ISAAC ASIMOV

# Science

## BY THE NUMBERS

Hypocrisy is a universal phenomenon. It ends with death, but not before. When the hypocrisy is conscious, it is, of course, disgusting, but few of us are conscious hypocrites. It is so easy to argue ourselves into views that pander to our own self-interests and prejudices and *sincerely* find nobility in them.

I do it myself, I'm certain; but by the very nature of things, it is difficult for me to see self-examples clearly. Let me give you, instead, an example involving a good friend of mine.

He was talking about professors. He could have been one, he said, if he had followed the proper path after college graduation. Now, he said, he was glad he hadn't for he wouldn't want to be associated with so uniformly cowardly a profession. He wouldn't want to bear a title borne by those who so weakly and supinely gave in to the vicious demands of rascally students.

His eyes glinted feverishly at this point, and he lifted his arms so that they cradled an imaginary machine-gun. He said, from between gritted teeth, "What I would have given those bastards would have been a rat-tat-tat-tat." And he sprayed the entire room

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with imaginary bullets, killing (in imagination) every person in it.

I was rather taken aback. My friend was, under ordinary conditions, one of the most kindly and reasonable persons I know and I made excuses (hypocritically doing for a friend what I would not have done for an enemy). He had had a few drinks, and I knew that he had had a lonely, miserable and scapegoated youth. No doubt at the other end of that machine-gun were the shades of those young men who had hounded him for sport so many years ago.

So I made no comment and changed the subject, bringing up a political campaign then in progress. It quickly turned out, again to my discomfiture, that my friend, who usually saw eye to eye with me, had deserted our standard and was voting for the other fellow. I could not help expressing dismay and my friend at once began to explain at great length his reasons for deserting.

I shook my head, eager to cut him short. "It's no use," I said. "You won't convince me. I hate your man too much ever to vote for him."

Whereupon my friend threw himself back in his chair with a simper of self-conscious virtue* and said, "I'm afraid I'm not a very good hater."

And the vision of the imaginary machine-gun with which he had imaginarily killed hundreds of students not three minutes before rose in front of my eyes. I sighed and changed the subject again. What was the use of protesting? It was clear he honestly thought he was not a good hater.

Heaven only knows how many people are now occupied in denouncing our technological society and all the evils it has brought upon us. They do so with a self-conscious virtue that tends to mask the fact that they are all as eager a group of beneficiaries of that society as anyone else. They may denounce the other guy's electric razor, so to speak, but do so while strumming on an electric guitar.

There must be some idealists who "return to the soil" and remain there for longer than the month or two required to develop callouses. I may conceive of them using sticks and rocks as tools, scorning the fancy metal devices manufactured by modern blast furnaces and factories. And *even so,* they are free to do this only because they take advantage of the fact that our technological society can feed (however imperfectly) billions

**If self-conscious virtue could be sold at a dollar a pound we'd all be rich. Me, too, for I am loaded down with as many tons of self-conscious virtue as anyone.*

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of human beings and still leave land for simple-lifers to grub in.

Our technological society was not forced on mankind. It grew out of the demand of human beings for plenty of food, for warmth in winter, coolness in summer, less work and more play. Unfortunately, people want all of this plus all the children they feel like having, and the result is that technology* in its command-performance has brought us to a situation of considerable danger.

Very well, we must pull through safely —but how? To me, the only possible answer is through the continued and wiser use of technology. I don't say that this will surely work. I *do* say, though, that nothing else will.

For one thing, it seems to me that we must continue, extend and intensify the computerization of society.

Is that thought offensive? Why?

Is it that computers are soul-less? Is it that they don't treat human beings as human beings, but merely as punch-cards (or as the electronic equivalent).

Well, then, let's get it straight. Computers don't treat anyone as anything. They are mathematical tools designed to store and manipulate data. It is the human beings who program and control computers who are responsible, and if they sometimes hide behind the computer to mask their own incapacity, that is really a human fault rather than a computer fault, isn't it?

Of course, one might argue that if the computer weren't there to hide behind, the human beings in charge would be flushed out and be forced to treat us all more decently.

Don't you believe it! The history of administrative ineptitude, of bureaucratic savagery, of all the injustices and tyranny of petty officialdom, long antedates the computer. And that's what you'd be dealing with if you abolished the computer.

Of course, if you dealt with a human being, you could reason and

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**Mind you, I say "technology" and not "science". Science is a systematic method of studying and working out those generalizations that seem to describe the behavior of the universe. It could exist as a purely intellectual game that would never affect the practical life of human beings either for good or evil, and that was very nearly the case in ancient Greece, for instance. Technology is the application of scientific findings to the tools of everyday life, and that application can be wise or unwise, useful or harmful. Very often, those who govern technological decisions are not scientists and know little about science but are perfectly willing to pander to human greed for the immediate short-term benefit and the immediate dollar.*

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persuade — which means that a person with intelligence and articulacy would have an advantage over others with just as good a case, who are unsophisticated, inarticulate and scared. Or you might be able to bend an official decision by slipping someone a few dollars, by doing a favor, or by calling upon an influential friend. In which case, those with money or importance have the advantage over those without.

But that's wrong, isn't it. It is to soul-less impartiality that we all give lip-service. The laws, we proclaim, must be enforced without favor. The law, we maintain, is no respecter of persons. If we really believe that, then we should welcome computerization, which would apply the rules of society without the capacity for being blarneyed or bribed out of it. To be sure, cases may be different from person to person, but the more elaborately a computer is programmed, the more the difference in cases can be taken into account.

Or is it that we don't really want to be treated impartially? Very likely, and that's why I suspect hyporcisy has a lot to do with the outcry against computerization.

Do we lose our individuality in a computerized society? Do we become numbers instead of people?

Alas, we can't be people without having handles. We are all coded and *must* be. If you must deal with someone who resolutely refuses to give you a name you will refer to him by some description, such as "The guy with the red hair and bad breath." Eventually, you will reduce that to "Old bad-breath."

With time and generations that could become "Obreth" or something and may even come to be considered an aristocratic name.

In other words, we *are* coded. We can't be a "person" to more than the bare handful of people who deal with us every day. To everyone else, we are known only as a code. The problem, then, is not whether we are to be coded; the problem is whether we are to be coded *efficiently.*

It amounts to a difference between a number and a name. Most people seem to think that a number is much more villainous than a name. A name is somehow personal and endearing while a number is impersonal and wicked.

I recognize the feeling. I happen to love my own name, and I invariably make a big fuss if it is misspelled or mispronounced (both of which are easy to do). But I find excuses for myself. In the first place, my name is intensely personal. I am the only Isaac Asimov in the world, as far as I

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know; certainly the only one in the United States. Furthermore, if anyone knows my name without knowing me, it is entirely because of what I myself, personally, have done with my life.

And yet it has its drawbacks. My name is difficult to spell and difficult to pronounce, and I spend what seems several hours a year negotiating with telephone operators and attempting to persuade them, in vain, to pronounce my name just approximately correctly.

Ought I to have some simpler and more pronounceable name? But then I would be lost in a nominal ocean. There must be many people who prefer names to numbers and have names like Fred Smith, Bob Jones and Pat McCarthy. Each of these is shared by myriads, and of what real value is a sound combination endlessly duplicated? Imagine the history of mistakes such duplication has led to, from the billing of someone for an article he didn't buy to the execution of someone for a crime he didn't commit.

Numbers are names also but are *efficient* names. If they are properly distributed, there need be no duplications *ever*. Every single number-name can be unique through all of Earthly space and time. And they would all be equally amenable to spelling and pronunciation.

Naturally, we should distinguish between a man's official code-designation and his personal one. Even today, a man may have the name of Montmorency Quintus Blodgett, and no document involving him may be legal without every letter of that name carefully formed in his own handwriting, yet his friends may call him Spike. To have an official number does not mean that you must be *called* by that number.

Just have that number on record. Have it unique. Have it convenient. And have it easily stored and manipulated by computer. You will be infinitely more a person because there is something that is uniquely and ineradicably you forever reachable, than by having a meaningless name dubiously known to a few dozen people.

The day of the number is upon us already, in fact, although in a very primitive fashion. It is here because we insist on it. We insist on overloading the post-office to a further extent each year, so we need zip-codes to expedite delivery. As true hypocrites, we complain bitterly about those zip-codes and would complain just as bitterly if we abandoned them and delayed our mail, as we would then necessarily have to do.

In the same way, the upward-spiralling number of long distance calls we all make and the reluctance of people to be telephone-operators rather

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than telephone-users (or to pay telephone bills that will enable the phone companies to lure operators to the switch-boards) makes area-codes necessary.

And as for social security numbers, try running the tax-system without them.

Of course, you are about to say, who needs the tax-system, and oh boy, do those words fall upon sympathetic ears. My tax-payments each year are higher by an order of magnitude than I ever dreamed (when I got my doctorate) I would ever make as total income — and I pay none of it joyously.

Nevertheless those taxes are there, despite the objections of everyone of us, because of the absolute demand — of every one of us. We insist that the government maintain various expensive services, and that means enormous and complicated taxes. To demand the service and complain of the payment is hypocrisy if the contradiction is understood and idiocy if it is not.

The greatest and most expensive of our demands is that the government maintain an enormous military establishment of the most richest and most powerful nation against the envious hordes without.

What, you don't demand it? You don't either? I guess that is because you and I are anti-militaristic and believe in peace and love. The fact is, however, that the American people, by a large majority, would rather pay for arms than for anything else. If you doubt it, study the record of Congressional votes and remember that there are few Senators and Representatives who would dream of offending their constituents and risking the loss of their precious jobs.

Yes, you're for cutting government spending. And I'm for cutting government spending. The only catch is that you and I and all the rest of us are for cutting it only in those areas which don't hurt us either emotionally or economically. Which is natural for hypocrites.

And if we all yell for reduction but all keep our heads firmly in the trough, there will be no reduction as long as our technological civilization remains stable.

Now, then, if we insist on huge and expensive government activities, and if we therefore expect the government to collect about a quarter of a trillion dollars a year from generally reluctant taxpayers who, by and large, find nothing unpatriotic in cheating, you place the government in a difficult spot.

It is because of that difficult spot that the Internal Revenue Service has

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the most unpopular job in the country (and I tell you frankly that I myself hate them from top to bottom being, unlike my friend, a fairly good hater). Yet that hateful job is essential, and it couldn't be done at all without social security numbers and computers.

Since the job must be done, let's make it less hateful. To me, it seems, the way out is to develop a national computer-bank, government-run (inevitably) which will record in its vitals every bit of ascertainable information about every individual in the United States (or in the world, if we are ever intelligent enough to work out a world government).

I don't look forward to this with sad resignation, or with fearful apprehension, but with longing.

I want to see every man receive a long and complicated code of identification, with symbols representing age, income, education, housing, occupation, family size, hobbies, political views, sexual tastes, *everything* that can be conceivably coded. I would like to have all these symbols periodically brought up to date so that every birth, every death, every change of address, every new job, every new degree earned, every arrest, every sickness, be constantly recorded. Naturally, any attempt to evade or falsify such symbols would clearly be an anti-social act and would be treated and punished as such.

Wouldn't such coding be an invasion of privacy? Yes, of course, but why bring that up? We lost *that* fight long ago. Once we agreed to an income tax at all, we gave the government the right to know what our income was. Once we insisted on having the income tax made equitable by permitting deductions for business expenses and losses, for contributions, depreciation, and who knows what else, we made it necessary for the government to deal with it all, pry into every check we make out, to poke into every meal in every restaurant, to leaf through our every record.

I don't like it. I hate and resent being treated as though I were guilty until I prove myself innocent. I hate dealing in an unequal fight with an agency that is at once prosecutor and judge.

And yet it is necessary. I myself have never been caught, so far, in anything but overpayments, and have therefore received only refunds, but I understand this is not typical. The I.R.S. by turning everyone upside down and shaking hard, collects millions of dollars which rightfully belongs to them by law.

Well, what if we were all thoroughly encoded and that all this encoding were manipulated and handled by computers. Our privacy would be no

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more destroyed than it is now, but the effects of that destruction might be less noticeable and irritating. The I.R.S. would not need to fumble over our records. They would *have* our records.

I, for one, would love to be in a situation where I couldn't possibly cheat, as long as no one else could possibly cheat, either. For most of us, it would mean a saving in taxes.

In fact, I would like to see a cashless society. I would like to see everyone work through a computerized credit-card arrangement. I would like to see every transaction of whatever nature and size, from the purchase of General Motors to the purchase of a newspaper, involve that credit-card, so that money is always transferred electronically from one account to another.

Everyone would know what his assets are at any time. Furthermore, the government could take its cut out of every transaction, and adjust matters, plus or minus, at the end of each year. You cannot cheat, you will not be concerned.

Will all this personal snooping enable the government to control and repress us more ruthlessly? Is it compatible with democracy?

The truth is that no government is ever at a loss, for methods of controlling its population. No computer is needed, no codes, no dossiers. The history of mankind is a history of tyranny and of government by repression, and some of the most repressive and effeciently despotic governments have had very little in the way of technology at their service.

Did the Spanish Inquisition use computers to track down heretics? Did the Puritans of New England? The Calvinists of Geneva?

The difficulty, in fact, is finding a government that is not repressive. Even the most liberal and gentle government, in which civil liberties are ordinarily scrupulously respected, quickly turns repressive when an emergency arises and it feels threatened. It does this without any difficulty at all, breaking through any legal barriers as though they weren't there.

In World War II, for instance, the United States government, which I love and respect, placed thousands of Americans of Japanese descent into concentration camps without any trace of legal right. It could not even be considered a necessary war measure, since the same was not done (or even dreamed of) with respect to Americans of German or Italian descent, although we were at war with Germany and Italy as well as with Japan. Yet the action met with little resistance and was actually popular, entirely because of our suspicion of people with funny-looking eyes and because of our fear of Japan in the immediate aftermath of Pearl Harbor.

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That's the key word: "fear." Every repression is aroused by fear. If not by general fear, then by the fear of a tyrant for his own safety.

In the absence of detailed knowledge about its population, a government can only feel safe if it represses *everybody*. In the absence of knowledge, a government *must* play it safe, *must* react to rumors and suppositions, and *must* strike hard at everybody, lest it be struck. The worst tyrannies are the tyrannies of fearful men.

If a government knows its population thoroughly, it need not fear uselessly; it will know *whom* to fear. There will be repression, certainly, since the government never existed that did not repress those it considered dangerous, but the repression will not need to be as general, as enduring, or as forceful. In other words, there will be less fear at the top and *therefore* more freedom below.

Might not a government repress just for the hell of it, if it has the kind of opportunity computerization gives it. Not unless it is psychotic. Repression makes enemies and conspirators, and however efficiently a computer may help you fight them, why have them if you don't need to create them?

Then, too, a thorough knowledge of the characteristics of its population can make more efficient those government services we now demand. We cannot expect the government to act intelligently if it does not, at any time, know what it is doing; or what, in detail, is being demanded of it. We must buy service with money in the first place, as all taxpayers know; but we must then buy useful and efficient service by paying out, in return, information about ourselves.

Nor is this something new. The decennial census has grown steadily more complex with the years, to the benefit of the businessman and the administrator, who find in it the information that can help guide their responses. Well, I only suggest this be carried to its ultimate conclusion.*

Will such an ultimate computerization, such a total conversion into a society following a by-the-number organization, wipe out initiative and creativity and individualism?

Such as in what society that we have ever had?

Show me the society at any time in the world's history in which there was no war, no famine, no pestilence, no injustice. We have had societies

**Actually, now that I think of it, I used this notion in my story, "All the Troubles of the World," first published in 1958 and included in my collection "Nine Tomorrows" [Doubleday, 1959].*

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in which there was initiative and creativity and individualism, yes, but in only a small upper layer of aristocrats and sophisticates.

The philosophers of Athens had time to think and speculate because Athenian society was rich in slaves that had no free time at all. The Roman Senators lived lives of luxury by plundering all the Mediterranean world. The royal courts of every nation, our own southern gentry, our own northern industrialists, lived easy on the back of peasants, and slaves, and laborers.

Do you want those societies? If so, where will you yourself fit in, given such a society? Do you see yourself as an Athenian slave, or as an Athenian philosopher; as an Italian peasant or as a Roman senator; a southern share-cropper or a southern plantation-owner. Would you like to be transported into such a society and run your fair share of risk as to the position you will occupy in it, remembering that for every one in comfort there were a hundred or a thousand scrabbling in the dark.

Hypocrite! You don't want the simple society at all. You just want to be comfortable and the hell with everyone else.

Fortunately, we can't have simple societies anyway. The only thing we can legitimately aspire to, is exactly the complex society we now have — but *one that works.* And that means complete computerization, because the society has grown too complex to be made to work in any other way. The only alternative, the *only* alternative, is utter destruction.

If we program our computers properly, we will be able to apply minimum taxes; we will be able to hold corruption to a minimum; we will be able to minimize social injustice. After all, any society in which the people are plundered, in which the few enrich themselves, in which large segments of the population are poor, hungry, alienated and angry, contributes to its own instability.

Individuals may be short-sighted enough to prefer their own immediate benefit and the hell with all others, including their children, but computers are not that soulless. They would be geared to the working of a society and not to the comfort of individuals and, unlike the uncontrolled human being, would not sell out society's birthright for an individual's mess of pottage.

Again, individuals may be emotional enough to want war to enforce their views, even though a war almost invariably ends with both sides generally losing (though particular individuals may profit), and no war can conceivably be as useful as a sensible compromise. But a computer,

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properly programmed, can't possibly be so soulless as to recommend war as an optimum solution.

And if the various nations all computerized themselves in a properly-programmed fashion, I suspect that all the national computers would, so to speak, agree on solutions. They would all recommend compatible programs since it is clear that in this day, and even more so in future days, no one portion of the Earth can profit from evil to another. The world is small. We rise together, all of us; or we sink together.*

So that's what I want, a world without war and without injustice, made possible by the computer.

And, because I try *not* to be a hypocrite, I will admit frankly that I want such a world for purely selfish reasons. It will make me feel good.

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**Actually, I made this point in a story entitled "The Evitable Conflict" first published in 1950 and included in my collection "I, Robot [Doubleday, 1950].*

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Miriam Allen deFord's new story is about a crime that takes place some 200 years in the future and that is unusual in at least two ways. For one thing, the crime is murder, at a time when murder is almost unknown; for another, the Security people call on, of all things, an sf editor to aid in the solution!

# Murder in the Transcontinental Tunnel

## by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

For most people, including commuters, the half-hour ride through the Transcontinental Tunnel is a big bore — and I didn't intend to make a pun. There would be nothing to see, at 6000 miles an hour of magnetic flotation, but the concrete walls, and so there aren't any windows. There isn't room in any of the big one-car passenger-freight trains for music or video, or even for seat-back holders so that passengers could read microtapes. But now that most of the superjets and turbs are tied up with interplanetary travel and the surface is pack-jammed with agricultural agglomerates and cities with strict anti-auto laws (I think Detroit was the last to welcome buses or autos; all the rest have gone over to intracity rail-hangers and intercity hydrofoils), there isn't much choice. Oh, there are a few, mostly old people and claustrophobes, who won't use the tunnels. My own mother was one; she was middle-aged when the decades-long multibillion job was finished, and during the last of her 140 years she stayed home in Sanfrancisco and never left it again.

But anybody with a home on the West Coast and a job on the East Coast, as so many of us have, particularly professionals, must ride the tunnels whether we like it or not. The trip once cost $50 each way; now it's down to 10 cred. I myself have never minded it; after



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all, how much time does one have not filled to the limit with work or play? The gregarious chat with their neighbors; a lot of people just sleep, making up for a late night or a hard day; me, I actually look forward to the two trips on each of the three working days of the week. I can watch my fellow passengers and let my mind drift, which is good practice for a sci-fi editor who is also a sci-fi writer.

So this morning last May I was just sitting in my foam-balloon seat letting my mind play around, lazily hunting for a hook to tie somebody into a story, when — it happened.

How the perpetrator of the Crime of the Century ever got onto the train was never explained. Like everybody else, when I enter the station, I place the palm of my hand on the scrutinizing screen; and when it agrees with my registered code, the turnstile clicks. (They worked out this scheme after the skyjacks of 200 years ago.) One thing is sure, you can't fake a hand-geometer, with its minute measurements of size and shape and its reproduction of the lines of the palm; so he couldn't have been using a stolen ticket book and had his hand altered to match. As a matter of fact, I think the tunnel screen is harder to fool than the plastic card with the code figures used in hospitals and banks and other restricted areas. Perhaps his hand had been surgified to match that of a deceased citizen.

So there he was, a burly guy with a shock of bushy red hair — a throwback from our almost universal early baldness — dressed inconspicuously, but sporting something you hardly ever see nowadays, a mustache. The car went on floating on its magnetic field, and at precisely 8.43½ am (somebody with iron nerves checked it on his chrono), he stood up, faced us, and announced, "Everybody turn around and bury his or her face in the back of the seat."

Some of us — sure, I was one; I'm no hero and I aim to stay all in one piece— obeyed instantly when we saw what he was holding. Those minibombs are pure hell. The dumb ones or the heroes — one woman actually giggled as if this were a vidilaugh — changed their minds when he spoke again.

"I'll give you just one minute more," he said. "After that, if there's anybody at all in this car who hasn't his face hidden in the cushion, I'll let this thing go and blow us all up, myself with the rest. I'm indifferent about living or dying, but maybe you aren't. I'm counting to 60."

By the time he reached 15, I'm positive there wasn't a face to be seen.

"And stay that way till the train stops at the station, and for a 100

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count after that, to give me time to get away," he told us. "Just to put your minds at ease, I'll come clean with you. I'm not a robber and I'm not going to steal your wallets or jewelry. I'm not going to harm anybody in this car except one person. And don't worry whether you're the one; it will be all over in a minute more."

I couldn't see, but I could hear when he placed the minibomb gently on the carpeted floor. (Believe me, there wasn't another sound to be heard!) Then there was the soft hiss a police-type laser gun makes. And all of us still alive knew that one of us must be dead.

Murder is almost unknown today, with the enormous risk of apprehension by the World Police. But it does happen, and this time it had.

At last the train stopped at the end of the route. None of us dared move. A man near me started counting aloud, a woman joined him. When I heard "100," I twisted front again and opened my eyes. I was surprised to find my legs trembling violently. The killer was gone.

Then pandemonium broke loose. Half the passengers shoved and jostled to get out and away; the rest (myself, I admit, among them) milled around the seat where a woman sat, her face still pressed against the cushion, the back of her head a mess of shattered bone, torn flesh, blood, and brain tissue.

The killer had, of course, long been lost in the crowded station.

Spotter cameras watch every train; fire or a wreck would have alerted the authorities immediately; but on the infrequent occasions when a passenger has been taken suddenly ill or has died, he must depend for help upon his fellow passengers until the end of the journey. But the first panic-stricken commuters pouring out of our train gave the alarm at once, and the few of us still clustered around the dead woman were hastily ordered out by a squad of World Police, among whom were unmistakable members of the Security Force who stopped each of us and collected our identity numbers.

I expected, of course, to be subpoenaed for the inquest and then, if they caught the murderer, for his trial, and I expected also to be assailed by a mob of reporters from the newstapes and the vid. But to my bewilderment not a single reporter was there, and days and weeks went by with no publicity and no subpoenas. The grapevine was busy, however; I know I told all about the shattering experience in my commune that evening, and I'm sure all the rest did the same. Still the time went by, and after a while I ceased having

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nightmares about it to carry to my dream analyst.

I was busy as ever, between my coeditorship of our sci-fi micromag and my own sci-fi writing. And now I was preparing for the next convention, in London this time, of the Sci-Fi Writers of the World, since as vice-chairman of the North American District I was scheduled to give the principal talk at the banquet at which our annual awards are announced.

Though I had stopped dwelling on the grisly scene I had witnessed, I had certainly not forgotton it. As a sci-fian used to extrapolation from problems, I meditated a good deal on three unanswered questions: who was the murderer, who was the victim, and what had the motive been? I contemplated raising the issue in a micromag editorial, but I decided not to risk attracting the attention of the Security Force to our mag that way. There was another method, pointing to me alone, and I thought by using discretion I might get away with it. So at the last moment I canceled my prepared speech and took a chance.

When I got up to speak, I told our members that, as some of them might know, I had been present at a gruesome dramatic episode a few months previously on a Transcontinental Tunnel train. (The small countries, geographically, claim to consider our tunnels a joke; the larger ones, like Brazil and Australia, are busy trying to get tunnels of their own.) I said that, frankly, the Establishment in our region had suppresssed any public mention of it — doubtless, I added sanctimoniously, for excellent reasons — and naturally I had no intention of opposing their decision. Nevertheless, simply as a fascinating exercise in extrapolation, I invited my audience, all SFWW members, to suggest possible motives for this lurid crime.

"I warn you," I added solemnly, "that if anybody comes across with an idea I haven't already had, he or she had better put it in writing at once, before I work it into a story." (Laughter) "Of course," I added hastily, "if I or anyone else did write such a story, it would have to be altered in every detail so that it would not violate the obvious security directive. SFWW writers are all good World Citizens who wouldn't dream of interfering with government in its pursuit of criminals.

"Moreover," I went on, "if I did write such a story myself, and another member sent our micromag one that seemed better than mine to my coeditor and me, why, of course I would retire in the face of superior ability and kill my own yarn." (More laughter)

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I sat down and the audience-participation period began. I had caught people's fancy, and there were lots of suggestions, some of them too *outre* for even the farthest out sci-fi. (My real idea, I need hardly add, had been to open my own imagination block and spark a good story.) The weirdest one I can recall was that the killer was a clone who hated his replicas, which was nonsense a sci-fi writer should have been ashamed of, since clones have to be of the same sex.

One of the suggestions did, however, flash an idea that my stupid subconscious should have seized upon from the very first. Was the killer an extraterrestrial? The victim had not been; nobody saw her face, but I remembered only too well that her blood had been red. But the murderer? Suddenly I relived the whole thing in an instant — and I realized something my mind had been too frightened to register.

His lips hadn't moved. He had been wearing a voice box. He was neither a Terran nor a Terran colonist; he was an indigene of one of the colonized planets.

I was hardly going to hand that information over to some eager rival. I simply smiled and said that was indeed possible. But my brain was going a mile a minute as suggestions came from the floor: this one fact put an entirely different light on the crime.

A sex murder, because something had gone wrong in one of the occasional bizarre affairs between Extraterries and us? (They do occur, though we can't interbreed.) No, the whole m.o. and the killer's attitude negated that.

A political murder, then? Was one or the other a spy on the other's world? Not likely; our colonists pacified the natives on all our occupied planets long ago. A professional spy, such as we read about in ancient literature, would simply have nothing to do.

A feud? A vendetta? A rebellion? Just plain individual insanity? All of them seemed to me to have unshakable objections to their likelihood.

It was time to end the question period. One more person arose. A thrill of uneasiness shot through me.

I had noticed this man before at earlier sessions, and I was suspicious of him. Heaven knows we all have logorrhea, but he had a bad case of it. He was a compulsive talker who made speeches in the guise of asking questions. The rumor is that at every large meeting or convention, even of organizations as innocent as ours, the Security Force has planted undercover informers, and this man's unbridled talk had all the earmarks of the *agent provocateur*. I should

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have spotted him before I spoke.

Never looking me in the eye, he began denouncing my humorously intended warning that I would take advantage of any good ideas from the audience. "Why should our distinguished and honored speaker openly announce that he would steal our story leads if he could? And why did he not reply properly to the member who inquired whether he thought the murderer was an Extraterry? Is he concealing information out of greed as a writer — or because he has some liaison with government and is deliberately attempting to discover if any of us are hiding knowledge that the authorities don't want spread in public?"

And so on, while I stood with a fixed smile and kept nudging the chairman in vain to get him to shut the fellow up. He did take the hint at last and said firmly, "Very interesting, citizen, but we have to go on now to other matters."

The man sat down abruptly. Ostensibly he was a member of our Losangeles Branch, in good standing. Maybe he was — there is nothing to keep a Security informant from moonlighting as a sci-fi writer under a pseudonym.

After the awards concluded, I saw my suspect get up quietly from his table and sidle out through the door. My heart sank, as well it might. We began to leave the hall and drift toward late parties in members' hotel rooms. I was one of the last to go. I had no expectation that my suspect would reappear, but I was not surprised when a dark, stocky man intercepted me and said politely, "A word with you, please, in private." Whereupon he flashed a Security Force badge.

We are bred to be law-abiding nowadays, and in any case I was hardly going to argue with a Security man. "My room is right down the nearest scootway," I said.

He shook his head. "I regret, but I shall have to ask you to come with me."

From his accent, he was a Bulgarian or an Albanian, and they're tough babies. Also, all the Security Force people go armed. I followed him meekly through the upscoot to the heliport.

Sure enough, we went straight to headquarters. He led me to an office and seated me across a desk from him.

"I am sure," he said, "that as a loyal World Citizen and an officer of your society, you will be glad to explain why you confided to your membership this evening the fact that you were a witness to the Transcontinental Tunnel affair?"

"Nobody has ever told me that was a secret."

"Ah, so? But that no word of it has appeared in the news media

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might have brought it to mind," he replied suavely. "However, that is not so important; we cannot prevent the many witnesses from gossiping about what they saw. You are the first, however, to have spoken of it at a public meeting — and to have invited open discussion of it."

His tone became fierce.

"And why did you leave the impression that this criminal could be an Extraterrestrial?"

By this time I had pulled myself together. What could they do to me, anyway? There are no prisons to put me in; if I were fined, the owners of our micromag would find it economical to pay it — they've told me often enough how well satisfied they are with both of us coeditors; and if I were put under house arrest, I'd simply move from my commune into our office building, where we have an apartment on lease for visiting authors. So I said amiably, "Because I know he *is* one."

"How?"

"His lips didn't move when he spoke. I'll wager anything that if you stuck a knife in him he'd bleed green."

The Security man's face reddened angrily.

"You're very free with your surmises, citizen," he snapped. "Did you also have a tape recorder with you, or a camera, to give you data you are keeping to yourself instead of turning them over to us, as is your duty?"

I laughed.

"I had neither, and I'm certain if any of the other passengers did have, they were all too scared to think of using them. You forget, citizen, that I am a sci-fi professional, with years of practice in extrapolation."

"I forget nothing. I have reason to believe that you have somehow obtained highly classified information — and that is subversion."

"Oh, come off it," I said rudely. "You're just trying to bully me to make me shut up."

"Let me tell you a story. Way back when atomic fission was first discovered, a magazine of that period, like our sci-fi micromags now, published a piece of fiction in which even the top-secret method was outlined. The author and the editor were hauled before the FBI, which was the local Security Force of that era. There the writer proved that he had worked out the details from pure scientific knowledge from which he had extrapolated, and they had to let him and the editor go. It became a prize joke in sci-fi circles for years afterwards. You don't want this to be one too, do you?

"And let me add," I said severely, "that I'm on to your undercover man who reported to

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you. I'll expose him and he'll be expelled. If you plant a replacement, he'd better be a topnotch one, for they're easily spotted, and highly expendable."

He almost foamed at the mouth. I watched as he struggled for self-control. Finally he managed to say sarcastically, "I suppose you would like me to turn over all our data to you and your outfit and make you our collaborators."

"An excellent suggestion. Not all of us, though; we're too miscellaneous a crowd. But a picked group of us could certainly help you; Extraterries have been our specialty for centuries. And you might start with me."

I had meant it satirically, but I hadn't counted on the bureaucratic mind. He looked at me, startled. He seemed, to my amazement, to be deeply impressed.

"It is an idea," he said. "I shall consult my superiors."

"Do that," I said airily, "and tell them the story about the atomic bomb, too.

"Get in touch with me when I can be of assistance. It's about time that government learned to rely more on the discretion and loyalty of ordinary citizens.

"May I leave now? You'll have to show me the way."

Two days later he turned up at my commune. He knew my days off, of course. (And everything else about me; he made me feel naked.)

"We've decided to opt you in," he said. He didn't look very happy about it.

I'd been too busy to give it much thought in the interval. "Very well," I said crisply. "But you'll have to give me some details. I can't extrapolate much on what I have." I made up my mind that I'd make him sweat for what he'd put me through at the convention.

"For instance?"

"Well, it's obvious that you haven't caught him, or you'd never be desperate enough to come to me. Have you?"

"No, not yet, but —"

I just looked at him. They *were* desperate; he practically collapsed.

"Please understand, citizen," he pleaded. "This thing has interplanetary repercussions. His home planet — that isn't necessary for you to know, is it?"

"No, I don't care which planet he comes from, as long as it isn't ours." They must have put him through hell back at World Security headquarters.

"They're a very proud, arrogant people, and they're dreadfully embarrassed that one of theirs should make a public display of his private troubles before the natives of what, in wpite of having been colonized a hundred years ago, they

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still consider an inferior world."

Oh-oh! I knew now where he came from — there was only one world occupied a century ago. But that wasn't important, except that I'd read a lot about them, and was quite aware of their snooty attitude toward the rest of us. Neither did I swallow this version of a private vengeance.

"And the victim?" I asked.

"You mean you have not — guessed?"

"How could I?"

"Dr. Greta Valendin," he said reluctantly.

It was a shock, a real jolt. It shook me.

No wonder there was all this hush-hush. That brain spilled on a seat in the Transcontinental Tunnel had practically revolutionized modern ethnology. Valendin wasn't world-famous; she was worlds-famous.

But what possible connection could she have had with a murderous-minded Extraterry? I didn't ask the Security man, nor did I mention motive. I was sure they knew even less about it than I did. And I wanted time to think things over.

"All right," I said, dismissing him as abruptly as he had cornered me. I know it was petty, but I'm only human. I didn't even offer him a hospitable drink; I just stood up.

"Tell me where I can reach you in — oh, let's say five days, after my next working period."

"Don't you want to know —"

"Nothing more right now, thank you," I said. "I'll be thinking about it, and I'll have some more questions for you when I know what I need.

"And don't worry," I added meanly, "I shan't broadcast anything to anybody. The only person *I* have to consult is me."

He had the grace to look ashamed. But I didn't soften; I still resented being to all effects arrested under the eyes of my fellow members of SFWW.

I tried to dismiss the whole thing from my mind during my next working days. Then I took a No Sleep pill and concentrated all night on the problem.

Greta Valendin. Had she been on Ceres recently? — for that was the, well, really a moon, but we might as well call it a planet — in question.

Probably: she was always traveling from planet to planet on research missions connected with her Xenogenic Theory. And she was very buddy-buddy with the government, and hence with Security, which in itself would account for the hush-hush aspect of her murder.

A scientific genius, whose fame will outlast the centuries; but not an engaging human being —

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dictatorial, autocratic, domineering, dogmatic. Ethnology was what the ancients used to call her ivory tower, and she lived, so to speak, in its penthouse. Everywhere she went there were plaintive protests against her higher-than-thou attitude, her patent view of the objects of her studies as mere laboratory animals. Since most of her current research was among the thoroughly subdued autochthons of our colonized planets, the complaints had been minimal and easily ignored.

But Ceres was different. Had she met her comeuppance in its proud natives? It looked like it.

My Security man arrived promptly after I notified him that I had something to tell him. I wasn't pouring all my conclusions into is ears; doling them out bit by bit would be a lot better for my own welfare — and my own safety.

So I gave him only the general ideas I have outlined above. Even so much aroused at once both his interest and his suspicions — Security is always suspicious. I was perfectly well aware that everything I said would be exhaustively checked to see if I could possibly have profited by a leak from an untrustworthy civil servant. That suited me fine; it meant that inside the sacred precincts there had already been discussion whether the Tunnel murder might not have been a political assassination, inspired by outrage at Valendin's offensive tactics.

He took my statement calmly, saying that it wasn't much, but it would be discussed and evaluated. He did manage to get in a snide remark: "And which do you empathize with, citizen, Dr. Valendin or the malcontents on Ceres?" I made no answer. He left after my promise to do some more thinking and communicate with him again. I agreed that our "conversation" should remain strictly confidential; our reasons were very different, but equally strong.

Let him stew awhile, I decided. It was a week before I vidded him again. This time he invited me — "ordered" is more like it, but "invited" is a nicer word — to his own office, and he sent a Security copter to take me there.

As I anticipated, he was not alone. Every chair in the big office was taken, and from the badges I realized that my agent was the lowest ranking VIP present. Few civilians have ever seen so many top Security officers in one place at one time. They must have reached an impasse. They needed me.

I was not introduced to any of them, unless "This is the sci-fi writer and editor who claims to have thought up a solution to the Tunnel murder" could count as an introduction.

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I smiled affably and murmured, "Hardly a definitive solution, just a little extrapolation from the known facts."

Can you believe it? One of them actually asked me what extrapolation meant! I had to deliver a brief talk on sci-fi fundamentals. And another of them said inanely, "I thought that kind of stuff was written for children."

"It is written for and by people of all ages concerned with the nature of the universe and the future of mankind," I retorted. There was an awkward pause.

It was broken by a woman whose badge identified her as far up in the hierarchy — I found out later that she was Cultural Vice-Director for North America and, hence, the person immediately responsible for Valendin's research tours.

"Our liaison officer here" — she gestured toward my agent; apparently it is part of Security's policy never to mention names to outsiders — "tells us that you believe the murder of Dr. Valendin was inspired by subversive sentiments infecting the Ceres natives."

"Whether their sentiments are subversive or not," I said smoothly, "is for you, not me, to decide. But, yes, remembering that for years Dr. Valendin's tours have been followed by complaints against her and knowing the touchiness of the indigenes on Ceres, I do so believe."

"Dr. Valendin's methods may have seemed unpleasant to the supersensitive," she sniffed, "but they were her way of obtaining invaluable material to support the Xenogenic Theory."

"I'm sure of that," I said politely.

"Do you think this murderer was a paranoiac with delusions of grandeur who identified himself with the dissidents and took it upon himself to avenge them?"

It was time for me to spill a little more.

"I didn't say that," I replied. "On the contrary, I think he was a delegate, charged with a mission. Whether he volunteered or was chosen, and how, I have no idea. But I am quite certain he represented a much larger segment of Ceres Extraterrestrials than we know about, and that he had no more, as an individual, against his victim than had any others of the organization that sent him here."

That didn't go down well; there were frowns around the table, and one hand was poised over a button and then jerked away after his nearest neighbor shook his head reprovingly. I drew a deep breath: that button would probably have summoned a messenger to take me out — where? The eager beaver who had wanted to press it was the

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same official who thought sci-fi was for children.

The Cultural Vice-Director chimed in again.

"If that were so," she objected, "then why would the Committee for Extraterrestrials on Ceres have sent our World Government a most distressed appeal, asking us to keep the crime from becoming publicly known, because the natives were so terribly upset that one of their own should have been involved in a major crime on Earth?"

"You see," another agent put in triumphantly, "we had already connected the matter with Ceres."

"The committee," I said dryly, "is made up of colonists except for one token native. It doesn't want publicity because it is afraid of a revolutionary outbreak at home. If our news media make no mention of the affair, the people who sent their representative to shoot Dr. Valendin will still be uncertain whether he has succeeded and will hold back any overt revolt until they know. Meanwhile, the colonists will be building up their defense."

I enjoyed the dismayed glances I saw. Security is wonderful at keeping people down, but no good whatever at think-tank activities. I was rapidly becoming, not a nonentity to be milked dry and dismissed, but an oracle without whose advice they would not know what to do next.

The very Security man who had contemptuously described sci-fi as juvenile fiction had become a sci-fi fan in one easy lesson. "I think we should engage this citizen as a temporary professional aide," he suggested.

It wasn't that easy. They could stand a little more bait. "I'd be glad to help in any way I could." I said blandly. "Without pay, of course." Faces lightened. "And naturally under a vow of secrecy."

That fixed it. They took a vote then and there, and everybody agreed except, I was amused to note, my own special agent, the lowest ranking official there. If I became the group's baby, he would lose the importance of being the liaison officer.

I had them where I wanted them.

"Very well, citizens," I said. "With all due modesty, I think you have made a wise decision. I have no ESP; I don't pretend to be able to give you more than educated guesses, but like experienced detectives in other fields, I have had years of practice in ferreting out the follow-up on given data.

"But I must possess the data. I shall have to ask a few more questions."

I heard two distinct sighs. But they couldn't retreat now.

"First," I said, "I must know

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the present status of the investigation. You haven't located the killer?"

"No," one of them answered. "We haven't. He is probably back on Ceres by now."

"He is *not* back on Ceres. If he were, he would have told his associates of his success, and the colony would probably have a full-fledged revolution on its hands. I presume all the transplanetary ports have been alerted and are under surveillance?"

"From the beginning."

"Have you elicited any useful clues from any other of the passengers who witnessed the crime?"

"A few, but not enough." My interlocutor had tacitly been made their spokesman. "Principally the red hair and the mustache, so every barber on Earth knows there will be a bonus for turning him in."

That figured; there undoubtedly were underground barbers, but would an Extraterry on the run know where to find one? Since it has become the custom for every boy at 18, his majority, to have his entire head, face, and body shaved, nobody today owns an individual razor. There are some in museums, but a criminal lying low would hardly be able to enter one unseen. In any event, the museum guards would have been informed and be on the watch.

"We have had scores of reports of sightings, but not one has proved correct," he said dolefully.

"Very well, let's —"

"Extrapolate? From that?"

"Exactly. But first, another question. Why was Valendin on that train? Where had she been, and where was she going?"

I was pretty sure, but I wanted to find out what they'd say.

That simple, logical question was a bombshell. There were mutterings, uneasy snickers, red faces. Security was trying to suppress not only news of a crime, but a scandal as well.

Notoriously, government is more puritanical than the ancient Puritans themselves. With a little change of viewpoint, of course: it would mean less than nothing if Dr. Valendin had been traveling to or from a sexual assignation.

But when we liberated sex, we substituted another taboo. Not death. Birth.

Security must have found out she had been under the care of a doctor on the West Coast, and why. If for some unheard of reason her contraceptive hadn't worked, she could have had an abortion in public, and nobody would have noticed.

But the one thing one cannot have, without universal horror and condemnation, is a deliberately conceived surreptitious child.

Legal children are made and supplied as indicated, from the

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sperm and ovum banks, in laboratories. Greta Valendin, so close to the inner circle of government, so advanced intellectually beyond the dreams of any of us, had put herself above the law. If the father were known and apprehended he, like her, would be tried for felonious parenthood. But people would take it for granted that she herself wouldn't have been sure — what man or woman can be, in an era of casual promiscuity like ours? Greta Valendin, with her scorn for others and her supreme self-esteem, would defy any taboo, perhaps for the sheer self-indulgence of defying it. But she had been in effect a government employee, and government, like the old-time religious institutions, never washed its dirty linen except in strict privacy. They must have found the doctor and wrung a confession from him, poor devil.

So now I had the whole story. More, I had them by the short hair. Not only had I guessed their reason for suppressing news of the crime, but I had by now inspired them with an almost superstitious terror of the clairvoyance of sci-fi, so that they dared not try to suppress me too. My only regret was that now I could never write that story, however well disguised.

I swept the table with a deliberate look of satisfaction.

"The victim," I told them, "is dead. The proof of the scandal that might have erupted died with her.

"Only one thing remains: the assassin himself. You asked me for extrapolation, not for political advice. But I shall give you some — take it or leave it. If you catch and punish the murderer, you will risk civil war on our oldest colonized world. He did the job he was sent to do, and there is no further danger to be expected from him. Keep the ports alerted, intercept all communications between Earth and Ceres. Then the rebels there can be quietly picked up one by one while they are still waiting for news from their agent. Someday, I prophesy, civil war will come, but not in our time, and we can safely leave that problem to posterity.

"As for the killer, he must be smart enough to realize soon that he is going to be able neither to return home nor to get word to his colleagues. There will be nothing for him to do but go into hiding until he can be depilated, learn to move his lips when he speaks, and try to get by as one of us. If he can manage it, perhaps no one will ever know the truth about him till he dies and is autopsied and they discover that his blood is green."

"And what makes you think," said the Cultural Vice-Director truculently, "that we are going to let this vicious creature go unscathed? Why, he may even have

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Terran helpers!" She glared at me as if I were one of them.

"You will do so, citizen," I replied, "because, like every other entrenched establishment, the Security Force cannot afford to lose face. If you located and arrested this criminal, he would have to be tried in open court, and concealment would be at an end. Greta Valendin was your bright particular star; all her fame was promoted by you and was an inextricable part of your own public relations setup. You won't take a chance of ruining that."

She subsided, and there wasn't a peep out of anyone else.

"Citizens," I said, "so far as I am concerned, you have no further need of my assistance. I have a heavy work load on the micromag and imminent deadlines on two sci-fi stories. If you want a formal pledge that I will never reveal, in speech or writing, anything that has passed between us here, administer the affirmation now and I'll sign it.

"And then may I leave?"

As I coptered to my office, I couldn't help reflecting how overcome that bunch of Security officials would have been if they had had the slightest inkling of the real truth, which assuredly they would never learn from me.

For the fact is that I had know Greta Valendin for years. She never belonged to SFWW, she wasn't eligible; but she had been a sci-fi fan since she was a girl. I never even liked the poor bitch; her high-and-mighty arrogance irritated me almost as much as it must have infuriated the proud Ceres natives. Even in bed I didn't care for her. But I leaned over backwards to hide my dislike of the woman because of my admiration for the scientist.

So when for some perverse reason she made up her mind to have a surreptitious child, I was positively flattered that she chose me to be its father.

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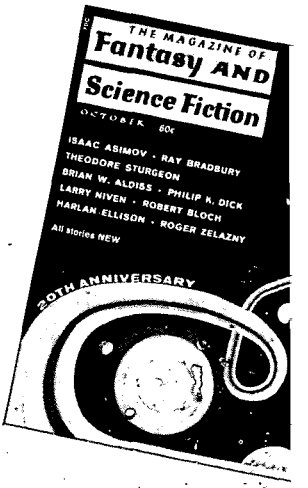


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